



# How to Marry the Boss

**Author:** *Mallory Black*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** I need to stop crushing on my brother's best friend. Too bad he's my boss and my roommate.

Mia

Life sucks.

I've been in love with Jake Hall since I was a teenager, but he's always seen me as his best friend's kid sister. Now that I'm out of college and starting my career, I need to get over him. But that's not easy since he's also my boss.

Worse, my brother is convinced I need a keeper; so Jake moved in with me. And then he laid a shocking New Year's Eve kiss on me...

Jake

Oh, hell no.

I'm done hiding my feelings for Mia Knight to keep the peace. While pretending I'm merely watching over her, she tells me she's seeing someone else. I'll prove to Mia – in every filthy way I know – that she belongs to no one but me.

**Total Pages (Source):** 74

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

## Chapter One

Six years earlier

Dallas, Texas

Mia

The number of outfits I'm trying on has become the equivalent to most clients in those wedding-dress reality shows. I'm struggling to decide which dress is the right one.

Today is my eighteenth birthday. Things now have to change for the better, right? From the time I was fifteen, I couldn't stand this boundary between him and Jake Hall.

And now that it's no longer in my way, I feel like I can do anything—except choose a damn dress for my birthday celebration.

“Dammit.” I groan, laying my body across my bed in defeat. “I'm not going. I have nothing to wear.”

My bestie, Joselyn Andrews, stares at me crisscrossed on my bed. “It's your birthday party. You can't not show up.”

I get her point, but at the same time she's forgetting how my parents operate.

I turn my gaze from the ceiling to her tanned face. “Let’s be honest; this isn’t my party anyway.”

It’s just another excuse for my parents to host another soiree and show how amazing they are to their snobby friends. That’s what they do. They did the same thing at all my other birthdays, as well as my older brothers’, Jonathan and Nathan. From the moment guests arrive to when they leave, the event is about them. Most of the people on the guest list I’ve never met in my life, nor do I care to meet them.

My best friend, who I’ve known since second grade, is well aware of this. “You’re not wrong about that. But that doesn’t mean you can’t make it your own. Look, you don’t have to dress up if you don’t want to. We can chill in our comfies, sneak some snacks from the kitchen, and watch your favorite movies.”

Normally I’d agree to this, but my parents would notice. “You know I can’t do that. They’d say I’m making the family look bad.” I stand up from the bed again, and look at her through the reflection in the full-length mirror. “Maybe later though.”

“I still stand by my original statement.” Jocelyn moves on, scanning me up and down. “That dress looks nice on you and makes your eyes pop.”

I scan a critical eye at the spaghetti-strapped, teal ombre dress that stops just below my knees. “Sure, but does it scream, ‘I’m an adult’?”

Jocelyn rolls her eyes. “Just because the dress doesn’t have cleavage or a slit doesn’t make you look any less like an adult. Dress it up with heels and jewelry, and see how you feel.

I get where she’s coming from, but everything I own doesn’t give me the wow factor I need for him to notice me.

Jake Hall had ruined all other guys for me from the moment I met him. I was nine. And all he had to do was breathe and smile in my direction. I didn't even see the tidal wave of new emotions coming. Something I'd never felt before in my young life at the time. Who would? Most girls my age don't think about anything other than dolls and playing dress-up, much less men that are almost a decade their senior.

As Jonathan's friendship with Jake grew stronger, so did my crush. But the older I became, the more I resented the fear that Jake only saw me as the kid sister.

Even when I became a freshman in high school, and all my friends started dating boys around our age, no one ever seemed to measure up to Jake. Sure, I'd dated a guy or two to keep up appearances and to feed the occasional curiosity, but even then, no one could compare.

Today is the day where I no longer have to hold my feelings for him tight against my chest. I can finally confess to him how much I like him. But not in a dress that hides everything I want to show.

"I need to go sexier."

Jocelyn cocks her head to the side. "How sexy are we talking?"

"I'm thinking something sexy enough to grab a guy's attention, but not too sexy to make my brothers want to bleach out their eyeballs. Something classy overall."

Silence falls between us as we think. Then a thought pops into my head. A vintage dress of my mom's that I'd forgotten about forever ago.

I turn to my bestie. "Follow me."

I rush out of my room and down the dark wooden stairs. If there was any good time

to raid my mother's closet, this is it. Especially when she's decided to "taste test" all the booze at the open bar. And God only knows where my dad went off to, and with whom.

When Jocelyn and I rush into my parents' bedroom, we stop at the threshold of their "his and hers" closet. Dad's side has a masculine interior with dark mahogany wood all around, while Mom's closet gives an elegance and classy aesthetic with its off-white wooden structure.

Walking into her closet is like walking into a high-end boutique. Everything from her jewelry to her shoes is from every different kind of high-fashion designer. A large island with a granite countertop sits in the middle of it all. My mother's shoe collection, which is presented on shelves that go as tall as the ceiling, is large enough to provide for an army. Assuming all they wear are YSL stilettos and Chanel slippers.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

I dart straight for the French doors at the left side corner of the closet that contains her dresses. I only need to shuffle through a few of them before I find the one I'm looking for.

"This is it!" I stare at the garment as I take it off the rack and turn to face Jocelyn.

The dress is so gorgeous, I find it hard to pull my gaze from it. But when I do, I notice my best friend's awed expression.

"Where has your mom's closet been all my life?"

Turning my gaze back to Josie, I show her the black, strapless dress with a keyhole just under the bust. Ruffles cascade down the length of the skirt.

Her eyes go wide. "It's gorgeous." She pauses. "Would your mom notice the dress missing?"

I shake my head. "She's got so many clothes in here, she'll never notice."

My mother is too in her head to realize there are other people in the world besides her. Despite the fact she's my mother, I've always considered her a stranger.

The dynamic in our family isn't what anyone would call "normal." Estranged is the word I'd use. I'm as close to my parents as someone would be to a roommate they tolerate.

Wasting no time, Josie and I rush back up to my room with the dress in hand. My

bestie closes my bedroom door behind us.

I immediately strip off the dress I have on and don the other. As soon as the garment is on my body, I walk back to my full-length mirror. I can picture it now. I'm walking toward Jake's direction. He can't keep his eyes off me. Oh my god, just the thought makes my heart flutter. Even if nothing happens between us tonight, I have all summer and community college to catch his eye.

Sure, I applied to multiple colleges, but the truth was I didn't care where I applied. I have my heart set on staying local for Jake.

I look at my best friend through the reflection. "I can't reach the zipper. Can you zip me up?"

"I got you, girl." Josie moves quickly behind me, zipping up the back. "Fits like a glove."

Analyzing the dress, I instantly fall in love with what I'm seeing. The cleavage shows I have boobs. The dress hugs my waist, emphasizing my hips and curves.

"It's perfect," I almost squeal with excitement. "All I'm missing is?"

"Black heels?" my best friend says with a smirk as she presents me with my favorite, sleek black heels.

Half an hour later, after putting on makeup, fixing our hair, and helping Jocelyn don on her short dress, we hear guests beginning to arrive.

"Now I'm ready." I tell her, feeling satisfied and then some.

For the next twenty minutes, we sit in the kitchen and people watch. Like all parties

in the past, everyone has dressed as though this party were a royal wedding, big, ridiculous hats and all. Josie and I find it hard not to laugh.

We're caught off guard when we hear a deep voice that I know all too well. "So this is where the party is at."

Jonathan Knight, my oldest brother, walks in with a bottle of champagne and a gift bag.

If he's here, then so is Jake.

I try not to let that thought consume me whole, but it's useless.

I force a smile on my face to hide my growing nerves and increasing heart rate. "As always."

Nathan is in tow behind him. "Hey, baby sister." He holds me in a hug.

"Hey yourself."

Nathan lets me go when I hear the rough, deep, hypnotic voice I've been wanting to hear the most. "Hey, Mia."

I look over to the side of Nate's shoulder. The moment my gaze is on him, I feel my senses going into overdrive.

He has to notice my outfit, right?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

Like Jonathan and Nate, Jake is in business casual attire. His navy-blue dress shirt compliments his tanned skin well. His collar is open, showing the top part of his muscled chest.

I walk toward him. My heart is fluttering as we exchange greetings. I feel my cheeks turning red. We then hug. It's hard not to notice the smell of cologne. Oh, god, that smell combined with his natural musk is heavenly. As much as I'd love to be in his aroma all night, and every night thereafter, I force myself to pull away.

"Something for the birthday girl," he says, handing me a pink envelope with my name written in his handwriting.

Even though he's given me birthday and Christmas presents before, I'm always excited to get something from him.

I stutter. "T-thanks."

"Always," he smiles that charming grin that I can't seem to ever resist. The one that makes me dizzy with delight. And like a school-girl crush, I find it near to impossible to hold back a giggle.

The party continues close to midnight. Josie and I, among the remaining guests, are standing around and socializing on the large patio deck. My best friend and I are on one side of the large pool, while Jake talks with another group of people on the other.

All night, I've tried to watch Jake from a distance, hoping to catch his eye. But in doing so, I realize that my planning had only gotten me that far, apart from dressing

to impress. After that, like a foolish, hopeless romantic, I thought he'd do the rest and proclaim that he wants me as his.

I'm such an idiot.

"Are you going to stare at him all night?" Jocelyn's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

I cringe. "Is it that obvious?"

"Why don't you just go and tell him how you feel? Some guys like a girl to be forward."

In a perfect world, sure. But I'm not that type of girl. "You know that's not me."

"I know. But sometimes we have to do things out of our comfort zone to be noticed or get what we want."

I shrug. "What can I say? I'm an old-fashioned, hopeless romantic who is infatuated with a man who's almost ten years her senior."

"If you really want him, go for it. The world is now your oyster."

"And if he says no..."

"Then at least you tried. And it's his loss, not yours. Besides, he's just a guy, not a god."

I shake my head. For years, I dreamed about the day I'd tell Jake that I like him. But now that that day has come, I'm suddenly lacking the courage.

"I don't know if I can do this."

She pauses as though in thought. And then she looks over my shoulder. “Give me a minute.” Walking over to the openbar, Josie swipes two glasses of what looks to be margaritas and hands one glass to me.

“What are these for?”

“You need some courage? Drink up.” In just a few sips, she all but downs her glass.

I do the same. The drink is strong as I swallow. After I’m done, I look back at Jake. Suddenly the thought of confessing my feelings doesn’t feel so daunting anymore.

I hand Josie my now empty glass. “I’ll be right back.”

“You go, girl!” I hear Josie cheering me on as I start walking around the pool and to the other side. The back of Jake’s head is in my view.

I’m a few feet away when I hear him and his group of guy friends laughing. Feeling awkward, I stand with still quite a distance away for them, so they don’t notice me right away. What should I do? I don’t want to interrupt them. I also don’t want to embarrass myself in front of others. Maybe I should ask to speak with him in private. Yeah, that will work. Less nerve-racking, that’s for sure.

One of the male’s voices pulls me from my thoughts. “Say, Jake. I noticed Mia is looking quite...mature tonight. You thinking about tapping that any time soon?”

What a blunt question. Yet I wait on bated breath for a response from him.

Jake scoffs shaking his head. “Don’t be a fucking idiot, Caleb. She’s Jonathan’s kid sister. Nothing more. I don’t think of her like that.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

In a matter of seconds I feel my heart sink into my stomach. Did he really just say that about me?

I've been a fool.

I feel my throat clench, and my eyes begin to well up with tears.

Present day

KH Industries

Dallas, Texas

Jake

If there's a hell on earth, it would be pretending I don't have a hard-on for my best friend's little sister.

Ever since Mia Knight turned seventeen, I'd been unable to ignore the obvious fact she'd become a woman. For the longest time, I only saw her as my best friend, Jonathan Knight's, kid sister.

I was over at the Knights' family home one day when I noticed Mia outside sunbathing beside the pool. Once I caught sight of the beauty in her ocean-blue bikini that hid nothing, I couldn't look away. Her milky skin glowed against the beaming sun. Her hourglass shape, that I didn't realize was there until that moment, was on full display.

Holy fuck. When did that happen?

From that moment on, she only needed to walk into my line of sight, and my dick would instantly harden. But I never acted on my sexual instincts. How could I? She was jailbait, a minor. At least until she turned eighteen. But even then, I'm nine years her senior. At the time, I felt like a pervert. Yet that didn't stop me from fantasizing about her in the process. And when I did, I chose to venture out for a faceless Ms. Right-Now to pretend she was her, and drown in that temporary pleasure.

At Mia's party, Jonathan had made it very clear to our friend group, including me, that we weren't allowed to pursue his littlesister. And rightfully so. If I were in his shoes, I'd do the same thing. She was barely legal, young and impressionable to the world, and the last thing he wanted was for her to get hurt by any of us.

Despite the fact I was already hiding my feelings for her, I chose to assure my friend group, including J, she'd never crossed my mind and never would. I couldn't bear the thought of losing my friendship and partnership with Jonathan.

When she announced to her family she'd be attending Cambridge, rather than the local community college she'd seemed to be set on, I was surprised. But I was also secretly relieved. Like a temptation had been taken away from view.

But now that she's in her early twenties, my thinking, along with the dynamic, has changed. The age-gap between us doesn't seem as pressing as it had when she was a teen. At least from my perspective. Maybe now Jonathan could be more lenient. She isn't a kid anymore, and he no longer has any say over her.

I sit in my office, overlooking paperwork in an effort to calm my anxiety. But I fail when I realize I've read the same line three times. Shaking my head, I give up and lean against my leather chair. Each minute that passes, each second that gets me closer to her, seems like an eternity. Today is the day I get to see her—in

person—after so long.

The last image I have of her was at her party. Four years have gone by, yet I remember only one part like it was yesterday. That tight bodice of the dress she wore. How it emphasized every curve I'd wanted to touch, lick, and kiss for so long. Jesus, I still get a rush just thinking about it. My cock is at full salute.

When Jonathan told me she'd decided to move back to Texas and work for our company, KH Industries, I was surprised. Surely she would have wanted to make a permanent life for herself in London. Did graduating from university change her mind? Could Jonathan have made her an offer she couldn't refuse? Whatever the case, I'm excited and nervous all at once.

Shaking my head, I try to think of something else—anything else—to get the image of her riding her pussy on my face off my mind.

Think of something boring. Numbers. The purple dinosaur on that kid show. Grandma naked.

My thoughts are put to an abrupt halt when I hear the ringtone of my phone go off. Grabbing hold of the device from my desk, I look at the caller ID. Jonathan.

I answer the call. "Hey, man. You guys on your way here?"

"Yep," he responds. "just dropped off her luggage at her place, so I'll be pulling into the parking lot in a few."

"Cool. See you then." I hang up before walking out of my office and outside the front entrance of the building.

Don't get this worked up. There's no telling if she feels the same way I do.

That's right. I'm just her older brother's best friend and nothing more. If that's how she feels about me, which is more than likely true, then there's no need to complicate things. Besides, love and relationships aren't my strong suit. I learned that one the hard way a long time ago.

Just as I walk out into the bright sunlight, Jonathan's car—a slick, black Mercedes—comes to a stop a few feet away. I walk quickly to the car and open the passenger side door.

“Hi, Mia. Long time, no—” What I see in the passenger seat is someone I wasn't expecting.

Instead of the young adolescent I once knew, in front of me now sits a fully bloomed young woman. Her dark hair is styled in a slightly messy bun with a few carefully placed, strands that outline her oval face. Her vivid blue eyes, similar to her siblings', are as bright as the sky on a cloudless day. Everything about her screams maturity, grace, and beauty.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

She looks up at me with those hypnotic eyes, and I all but freeze. Her juicy, plump, pink lips are something that will forever be ingrained in my mind. She wears a black sweat-jacket-and-pant duo that compliments her pale skin well and reveals a bit of cleavage.

“H-hi, Jake.” Her soft and angelic voice brings me out of my head.

As reality comes back to the forefront, so does the fact Mia and I aren’t alone.

Right, her brother is still here.

As much as I want to confess my feelings today, I can’t. There’s too much I need to do, to learn, to plan, before that happens.

For now I choose to act normal, not like I just discovered the eighth wonder of the world and want to fuck it.

“How was your flight?” I ask. Safe question, right?

“Long, but thankfully uneventful,” she replies.

I offer my hand to her when she swings her legs out of the car. The moment her fingers hit my palm, electricity runs through my arm and to the rest of my body, making me jolt slightly. Suddenly I feel more alive than I have in years. More motivated to claim her than I have been for anyone.

She lets out a small gasp. Did she feel that too? Or am I going crazy?

Once she stands upright from the car, she pulls her hand away. The absence of her touch has my body go cold.

Whatever that was, I want more of it.

She turns her attention to Jonathan. “Jet lag is already kicking my ass.”

“Then we won’t keep you long. I just wanted to give you a tour. Will your boyfriend mind?”

Boyfriend? Boyfriend!

I try to hide my surprise. I shouldn’t be shocked. She’s a beautiful woman. Only a fucking idiot wouldn’t be able to see that.

I’ll just bide my time. Play the friend, or friendly coworker, until things change.

She shakes her head no. Jonathan, with a hand to the small of her back, guides her inside the building. I walk behind them.

For the next hour, we go through one floor to the next. I can’t help but watch the sway of her hips with each step she takes. I struggle to stay focused.

Mia’s older brother continues to explain what each room is used for while she politely nods with understanding.

J concludes the tour in Mia’s new office—which happens to be between my best friend’s and mine.

J and I sit on chairs opposite her. A large, dark-colored office desk is between her and us. A huge window, overlooking a good portion of a park, is adjacent to us, which

illuminates the room in natural lighting.

“So...” He grins “What do you think?”

“What do I think? I think you gave me one of best offices in this entire building.”

“I’m glad you like it. Just know you can decorate the space however you want.”

“Trust me, I’m already thinking of an aesthetic.” She smiles, then gives him an incredulous stare. “What happened to the other guy?”

“He wasn’t you.”

She laughs. “You could’ve offered the job to anyone, J.”

“True, but I feel better around those I trust, who know what they’re doing, and won’t sugarcoat things for me, than otherwise.”

She leans back in her black leather chair, staring around the space. Every so often we lock eyes before she pulls her gaze away. Her cheeks turn a slight pink. Is she blushing?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

I fucking wish.

Suddenly a loud ring comes from Jonathan. Pulling his phone from his jacket pocket, he looks at the screen.

“I have to join a call with a client. If you need anything, let Jake know. See you later.” He exits through the large, thick glass doors.

I turn back in Mia’s direction. “What was it like living in Europe?”

She shrugs. “Fine.”

Her once happy and engaging attitude is now replaced by the exact opposite. Her smile is gone, she seems uncomfortable, and she’s looking everywhere else but at me. As though she were purposefully avoiding my gaze.

Thinking it could be my imagination, I continue to make small talk. “I imagine the culture is very different over?—”

Before I can finish my sentence, she stands from her desk.

“I appreciate the chitchat, but there’s no need. I’m sure you and Jonathan are busy today.”

I shake my head. “Him more than me. I’m pretty flexible today actually. Would you want to grab lunch with me?”

“I can’t,” she blurts. Her body stiffens, her expression almost panicked. She angles her body toward the door as though she is trying to get out of the conversation. “I need to leave soon.”

“Okay. Rain check, then?” Usually I wouldn’t push this much, but her body language is making me curious. Why does she seem so nervous about saying no?

“I think it’s best if we keep a...professional relationship.”

What does she mean?

“What’s wrong with old friends getting lunch together?” I subtly challenge.

She looks flustered, as though she’s struggling to come up with a better response. Why the hesitation?

After a short pause, she seems to calm herself by taking a deep breath and responds. “Given the rise in success within this company, which includes the growing demand to manage everything, I doubt any of us would have time for that.”

Why is she talking to me like one of my business emails?

Rising from my seat, I walk over to her. “That may be true, but we all have to have a well-deserved break now and then.”

A long silence fills the room. I fight the urge to take her hand in mine. To pull her close.

Those gorgeous eyes of hers, despite her insistence on professionalism, betray her. If I’m right, then what is it that she truly desires? Why is she denying herself that? And why do I get the feeling it has something to do with me?

Fuck it. I know I shouldn't want her, but I can no longer deny that I do. Not when I feel something there between us. Something as important as the air in my lungs.

Breaking the eye contact, Mia pulls her phone out. Her fingers glide over the device fast and efficiently. A few minutes later, she shuts the device off, shoves it back inside her purse, and stands.

"My ride will be here in a few minutes. Thanks for the tour. And tell my brother thanks as well." She walks down the hall to the elevators. Once again, I can't help but watch the curve of her hips and ass as she walks away.

"Sure thing." I'm hating the fact she's going home to some other guy. A guy that isn't me. And there's no doubt in my mind he's enjoying every moment with her.

As she disappears down the hallway, a thought occurs to me. She's saying no, yet her body says the exact opposite. What if she wants me as badly as I want her? And if that's the case, how can I get her to admit it?

## Chapter Two

New Year's Eve

Dallas, Texas

Mia

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

There's only ten minutes left before midnight.

Everyone cheers as I get drunk with my brother's assistant and now fiancée, Kiera, and our bestie, Kami Hernandez. Two girls I've come to be great friends with.

The Brick, owned by Jake and Jonathan's best friend, and now Kami's fiancé Ian Brown, is loud and crowded with party goers.

"I feel like I just moved in with you, and you're already leaving." I say to Kami.

Back in early November, I'd moved in with Kami after Kiera had just gotten engaged to my oldest brother. Also during that time, my ex and I broke up. The timing couldn't have been more perfect, and it saved me from the frustrating process of apartment hunting. But who knew that just less than threeweeks after I'd moved in, Kami would become engaged and moving out to live with her man as well.

"Don't worry, you'll still see me at the office," Kami tells me.

"I know that, but it won't be the same," I point out.

"True, but I'm sure you and your new roomie will get along great," Kiera assures.

"Maybe, but I've yet to meet her. She seems to be all but a ghost."

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I'd posted about needing a roommate on the internet. The day after, I received a PM from someone who saw my post. She said she was looking for a place to live and thought she and I would make a good fit. We

chatted to each other over the holidays, and we seemed to be getting along. The last I heard from her was when she reached out to me saying she'd be signing the papers in the next couple of days.

Kami looks at me, puzzled. "You mean she hasn't messaged you since?"

"She told me she'd get back to me about scheduling a time to move in, but that's it."

"Maybe she's busy with work or something." I appreciate Kami trying to find a simple explanation for me, but I'm beginning to worry if I've made a mistake, that I should have pressed more for us to meet in person.

"What are you beautiful ladies discussing?" Jake smirks at me as he stands beside our table.

Ugh, what does he want now?

I roll my eyes, avoiding eye contact with him. "Nothing concerning you."

He clasps a hand to his chest dramatically. "You wound me again, Ms. Knight."

I should be annoyed with him being in my space. But something in his sultry voice, and the way he calls me that, makes my body hum with excitement.

I'm in my twenties. I've grown up. He shouldn't affect me now like he did when I was a teenager.

"Don't worry. I think you'll live." I send him an incredulous stare, hiding my inner turmoil.

There's a short pause between the four of us before Kiera breaks the ice. "So, Jake,

Jonathan tells me you're moving out of your apartment soon."

He's what?

I look to Kiera with shock, then back to Jake as he responds.

"Yeah, I'm just about packed."

"Really?" Kami seems just as surprised as I am. "I didn't know you were moving out."

"Yeah, it's smaller than what I'm used to, but closer to the office, and I'm rooming with someone."

That makes zero sense. He seemingly makes a fortune from his position as Co-CEO of KH Industries. Why would he move into a smaller place and live with a roommate when, financially, he doesn't have to? Hell, he can afford to live in a place similar to where he is now.

"Who's the lucky girl?" Kiera teases.

I'm an adult. I shouldn't care what, or who, Jake does or doesn't do. Yet I find myself holding onto his every word like I did when I was younger. I have got to get a grip on myself.

Jake opens his mouth as though to answer Kiera's question, but Ian's brother, Matt Brown, walks up to the table with a tray of champagne in stem glasses.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“One minute to the New Year,” he says excitedly.

Right. One minute to the New Year. One minute until everyone can have a clean slate. I could use one of those right about now.

Matt continues his trek through the bar, handing everyone a glass of champagne. Kiera and Kami walk over to their men while I do my best to distance myself from Jake. Of all the places he could be standing, why next to me?

“I hope for your sake your roommate knows what she’s getting herself into,” I give Jake a snide comment.

“Twenty seconds!” I hear someone shout with excitement.

In my peripheral, I see Jake turn his body, as well as his gaze, toward me. “Maybe...you could tell me.”

I turn my attention to him. His eyes lock with mine. “What do you mean?”

Jake continues, inching closer to me. “I’m sorry I wasn’t clear earlier, but I had to tell you in person.”

“Tell me what?”

I hear everyone counting down from ten. But that’s background music against the thumping of my heart and the anxiety that’s creeping in. I don’t know whether to look away from him or keep our eye contact. His face is inches from mine.

“I’m your new roommate.”

“Happy New Year!” everyone around us shouts.

Before I can react, Jake wraps me in his arms, crashing his lips to mine.

I’m frozen in place. I have my eyes wide open as I watch him kiss me. What. The. Fuck?

In my book, a guy only kisses a woman if he’s into her. Jake has never and never will, taken me seriously like that. So why is he kissing me when he doesn’t actually mean it?

I should pull away. But all I can focus on is his lips on mine.

So this is what it’s like to kiss those lips. To be this close to him.

Wait. No. That’s beside the point. This has to be some kind of joke. If so, I refuse to be humiliated.

I force myself upright and push my hands against his hard, muscled chest, breaking from the kiss.

Just as I do, I hear Jonathan’s voice. “What the fuck, man?” He’s angry. Some might say even murderous.

When my brother comes into view, he looks ready to throw some punches until Nathan interferes like a referee at a football game.

“Guys, guys.” Nathan stands between the two men. “There’s no need to throw punches.”

“That’s my sister, you fuck.” Jonathan yells. His fiancée, Kiera Young, tries to pull him back.

Jake remains quiet, as though choosing to let his best friend tear him a new one.

“It’s New Year’s. Everyone has had a lot to drink,” Nathan tries to assure Jonathan.

“He’s right,” Jake responds. His once-serious expression shifts to a calm, almost smug one. “I’ve had one too many, and I got caught up in the moment.” Jake turns to me. “I’m sorry, Mia. I was out of line.”

I don’t know what’s worse, him kissing me as a joke or him saying our kiss was a drunken mistake.

What an asshat.

A couple of hours later, I leave the party on my own. The night is quiet, dark, and cold so early in the morning. My black coat keeps me warm against the freezing temperature.

I walk to my yellow Mini Cooper, and am about to unlock the passenger side door, when I sense someone behind me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

Quickly opening my purse, I grab the spray can of mace. I turn on my toes with my arm stretched out, ready to spray. My finger on the trigger.

“Don’t spray, it’s me,” a familiar male voice yells, covering his face with his hands. Jake?

I feel relief wash over me, followed by a sense of frustration, as I put the can back into my purse. “Jeez, Jake. Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

He rests his arms at his sides. “I wasn’t trying to scare you. I just wanted to talk to you.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “About what?”

“When I’ll be moving in.”

I roll my eyes. “Look, you’ve made your point. You don’t need to stretch this joke any more than you already have.”

“That wasn’t a joke. When I said I was your roommate, I meant it.” His voice is serious.

What the hell? “Why would you?—”

“Jonathan and I figured since he’ll be now...occupied, you’ll be needing someone to look after you.”

I stare at him skeptically. “And you’ve decided you’re the man for the job?”

He shrugs. “Someone has to make sure you stay out of trouble.”

Ugh, how many times do I have to tell my brother? I’m not a kid anymore. Using his best friend as a way to keep track of me is going way too far.

And given that Jake seems to be going along with this, his views of me seem to have stayed the same as they were all those years ago.

As if I need reminding.

I scoff. “That’s great and all, but last I checked, I’m not twelve anymore. I can take care of myself. So break your lease and take back your apartment.”

He shakes his head. “No can do. My old place just sold yesterday morning, I put down a deposit for your place yesterday, and all the paperwork has been finalized.”

And I’m just finding out about this now? “Are you fucking crazy?”

“Language.” He lowers his voice to the octave I’ve become familiar with every time I curse in front of him.

I ball my hands into fists.

God, he’s so aggravating.

There’s no getting out of this, and he knows it.

I sigh deeply. I really don’t want to do this, but...

“There will be strict ground rules.”

“I’m listening.” He leans against my car.

“Don’t be a slob. I expect you to clean after yourself. I’m not your maid.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says in that sultry voice of his.

This man is all but asking me to bitch-slap him.

“Stay in your own lane. Unless there’s an emergency, you don’t bother me, and I don’t bother you. Your business is yours. Mine is mine.”

He nods absently, remaining silent. Why do I feel like that isn’t a good sign?

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

I continue anyway. “As for guests, I tend to keep mine to a dull roar. I expect you to do the same.”

“Don’t be a slob, leave you alone, and no crazy guests. Got it,” he lists off with his hand. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“When can I expect you to move in?” The only thing I can do at this rate is prepare for his “invasion.”

He looks at his watch and shrugs. “This afternoon sounds good.”

Is he for real? “Today? Why not tomorrow? What’s the rush?”

“Why wait, baby girl?” he smirks.

I try to mentally hold myself back from arguing with him. Jake has been, and always will be, the type of man to stick to something once he’s set his mind to it.

“Fine. Later today. What time?”

“Yeah, one would be best.” He doesn’t even hesitate to answer.

Unlocking my driver’s side door, I throw my small purse into the passenger seat.

“Fine. I’ll see you then.” I don’t look at him as I get in the car and drive into the night.

## Chapter Three

Jake

Despite the overcast sky, today shows promise as I pull into Mia's apartment complex. My truck is filled to the brim with boxes. Good thing I have my furniture coming a few hours later.

I was serious when I told her I'd be moving in just hours after the New Year arrived. I've spent so long apart from her; I'm done standing by the sidelines. Being forced to watch her walk away from me is not only torturous, it also pisses me off.

I admit, I'm nervous putting myself in front of her like this. The last time I did that for a woman, the relationship didn't end well. Realizing then there wasn't going to be a forever was like a slap in the face.

For years, Mia has been on my mind. I've seen how much of a beautiful woman she's become. And now that she's in my line of sight again, now that the age gap between us doesn't seem so terrible, I want to take this chance with her. Not just to see if my desire to have her is unrealistic, but also to know if I'm meant to find love again. If I'm worthy of that white-picket-fence dream. I have to know if I'm meant for all of it. I can't keep wondering about this question anymore; I have to know.

Kissing her on New Year's felt good. It felt right. Her soft lips on mine made me crave her more than I ever did before. Did she enjoy the kiss as much as I did? I lied when I said the kiss was a drunk moment. I had to. Especially with the murderous look on Jonathan's face. If I had a do-over, it would have been away from prying eyes and even more passionate.

I want to tell my best friend how I feel about his sister, but when the time is right.

With my car keys in one hand, and a hot bag of burgers and fries in the other, I walk up to the red apartment door. Through the adjacent window, I see Mia with a pink mug in both hands as she stares daggers at me.

If any other woman showed me such a look of disdain, I'd proceed with caution. But I enjoy getting a rile out of Mia too much to back down. Besides, she looks cute when she's mad.

I give her a cheeky smile back and mouth, "Hi."

She opens the door and stands at the threshold. Her hair is in a long, messy braid. She wears a maroon, long-sleeved shirt and black sweatpants with white socks on her petite feet.

"You're here," she says with a flat expression. Her gaze turns to the bag in my hand. "With food?"

"I figured we'd have lunch before I got started."

"We?"

Yes, we.

"You still like your cheeseburger plain, right?" I hope she accepts my peace offering.

"You've got to be kidding me. First you move in with me without you or Jonathan asking first. Then you show up expecting to have lunch with me as you move in. And now you want me to be somehow okay with all of this?"

I don't blame her, but I continue with my white lie. It's true Jonathan wants to make sure she's okay, but he'd never go to these lengths. "He just wants to keep you safe."

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Sure.” She shakes her head. “You know what? This is bull. I’m calling my brother.” She starts to pull out her phone from one of the pockets of her sweats. “I don’t need his on-call babysitter on me twenty-four seven. He’s gone way too far this time with his over-protective brother crap.”

Ever since she was a kid, Mia has always been the type of person to question decisions that were made on her behalf. At least ones that didn’t have a logical explanation. So it’s no surprise she’d try to call him.

If I weren’t such a meticulous planner, I’d be freaking out right about now.

“You won’t be able to reach him, I’m afraid.” My words stop her fingers from fidgeting on her phone.

She looks up at me puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“His and Kiera’s plane took off about an hour ago. They’re on vacation as of today, remember?”

For my plan to work, I had to get Jonathan out of the way. Long enough for me to move in, convince Mia not to say anything to him, and to have time with her without interruptions. So I started having the occasional conversation with Kiera about different cruise ships that sail through the Hawaiian Islands. I couldn’t tell Jonathan he should go on vacation without him getting suspicious. But his fiancée could. And sure enough Jonathan told me, before announcing in a memo sent the week before New Year’s, he was taking Kiera on a prewedding Hawaiian cruise for a week and a half. And that if anyone needed anything from him, they’d either have to talk to him

before he left or after he came back. In other words, he'll be completely off his phone while he's gone.

Do I expect to win Mia's heart before Jonathan gets back and finds out what I've been up to? That would be wishful thinking, but anything is possible.

With an annoyed look on her face, she walks into the kitchen, leaving the door open. "Make yourself at home then, I guess."

I walk inside, closing the door behind me. "Certainly."

A few moments later, we are sitting at the table, quietly enjoying our hamburgers, when she speaks. "I didn't think you were the type that ate fast food."

"A cheat day is good every now and then." I shrug. "I'm surprised you still hate pickles on your burger. It's sacrilege," I tease.

"Are you kidding? I never have and never will." She looks over at my food. "Both pickles and mustard? That's disgusting. I don't know how you and Jonathan can stand that."

"I guess you could say it's an acquired taste."

She rolls her eyes. "That or you have no taste buds."

I laugh. The light conversation is nice. The last time we had a conversation like this seems like an eternity ago. Most of the time, even when Jonathan was pursuing Kiera, Mia was either digging at me for information or trying to ignore me.

She changes the subject. "Why can't you both trust me to make good decisions?"

I swallow the remnants of my burger. “Jonathan does trust you. It’s other people that are the issue. I’m with him on that, but the way he goes about it is different than what I’d do if I were in his shoes.”

I can remember the times when my best friend would be the first to cast his vote on who she’d date. Times when he had a friend who had a brother that went to her school to keep an eye on her. Times when he expressed his opinion about something whether she asked for it or not. Now that she’s older, he isn’t as overbearing. But he still tries to tell her what she should and shouldn’t do.

She takes a sip of her glass of water before speaking again. “And what would you do?”

“You’re an adult. I respect that. Jonathan and I just want to make sure you stay safe.”

“What do you mean you ‘respect that’?” she questions. “Let’s not forget; I almost sprayed you with pepper spray.”

Touché.

“True, but next time you might not be so lucky.”

“Unbelievable.” She shakes her head. “You sound just like him. I don’t need micromanaging from either of you. I may be a woman, but I’m not stupid.”

“I never said you were. And I don’t intend to tell you how you should live your life.”

“Babysitting, if not that, is basically what Jonathan wants you to do, isn’t it?”

I understand her anger and frustration. Pinning everything on Jonathan has clearly ripped open an old wound.

“Yes, but I’m not Jonathan. Do what you want. I’m not going to tell you otherwise. I might offer to be your sounding board now and then, but that doesn’t mean you always have to take my advice. All I ask is that you call or text me if you need anything. Whether you’re broken down on the highway, need a designated driver, or a shoulder to cry on. I just want to be there for you.” I might be too much on the nose, but it’s the truth.

She stares with a stern look on her face. She doesn’t trust Jonathan, so I’m guilty by association.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“As a friend.” If I’m going to win her heart, I first have to win her trust. Without trust, nothing I do will matter.

### Chapter Four

January 2

Mia

“So he actually moved in?” Kami seems fascinated by my latest news as we enjoy our lunch in my office.

“Unfortunately,” I reply. Both of my hands support my chin.

Kami cocks her head to the side. “You don’t seem that excited.”

“Why should I be? He’s constantly in my face now that we live together. This is only Jonathan’s way of babysitting me while he’s gone.”

Her eyes widen. “Really? Of all the ways he could’ve done that, I’d think having his best friend moving in with you would be the last thing he’d think of.”

“My brother is underhanded. You don’t know him like I do. He’s always got something up his sleeve.”

Growing up, there was nothing in my life that Jonathan didn’t know about. He knew where I hung out after school, whatkind of friends I had, and he paid special attention

to the boys I dated. Ever since I moved back home after college, though his overprotective tendencies aren't as crazy anymore, he still seems to know everything that goes on in my life.

“What’s it like living with Jake so far?” She smirks.

“It’s...odd. I’m not used to him being this close, much less sharing an apartment with him. I struggle with sleep knowing he’s in the other room.”

We’re only two days in, but he’s, so far, kept his end of the bargain. Not just with the ground rules, but with the way he’s promised to treat me like an adult. So if all seems to be going well, why am I so hyperaware of his presence? Why does my heart race every time he turns a corner and comes into view?

“Interesting you say that.”

I can see the wheels in her head turning. “What do you mean?”

She pauses. “Do you remember when Jake and I helped you move in?”

I nod. “How could I forget? He showed up unannounced when I already told him I didn’t need help, called me by his own personal nickname through the whole process, and then continued to annoy me about the furniture being too heavy for just you and me to carry.”

“He wasn’t wrong about that last part,” she points out.

Whatever. “That’s beside the point.”

“Based on what I saw that day, it looked as though you two were...vibing.”

What's she getting at? "Vibing?"

"There was chemistry between you two."

Younger me, who I thought was long dormant, emerges from her slumber at this news. I start to feel a sense of hope and excitement I haven't felt in a long time. But no. This isn't real. I shove those feelings back down as deep as possible. I was young and immature then. I've moved on.

I shake my head. "Sure we were arguing, but that doesn't mean there was chemistry."

She raises her hands in defeat. "I could be wrong, but I'm just saying."

She has to be wrong. Jake has never, and never would, flirt with me. His teasing is only because he thinks getting under my skin is fun.

"How long have you known him?" Kami asks.

"Since I was a kid. He and Jake met in college. That's how KH Industries was founded."

"Wow. I'm surprised you're not a founding member."

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

I scoff. “By the time they started talking about it, I wasn’t even a teen. And even then, I was never part of any of those conversations.”

“Knowing him as long as you did, you two must have been close.”

I look back to memories I haven’t thought about in a long time. Memories I’ve never been able to forget.

“He spent most of his time with Jonathan. But there were times I watched a movie or two with them.”

“If you guys got along then, why aren’t you now? Did he hurt you? Doesn’t seem like there was any falling out.”

I sigh. “No, nothing like that. Time went on, I got older, and I went away for college.”

“Did you have a crush on him by chance?”

What makes her think that? Not that she’s wrong. “Yeah, but it was ages ago. A phase.”

“What makes you say that?”

Isn’t it obvious? “I was a teen when I realized my feelings were one-sided, and I moved on.”

“Are you sure it was one-sided?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. What’s with the questioning?”

“I’m just...thinking.”

“That sounds frightening.” I’m partially teasing, but I’m also cautious.

“I just think that if he didn’t feel the same way, he wouldn’t be living with you.”

“But that’s not why he’s living with me. He’s doing it because Jonathan told him to.”

She shakes her head seemingly amused. “Whatever you say.”

“You don’t believe him.”

“Just think about it for a second. Jake kisses you on New Year’s Eve, tells you that night he’s moving in with you, and does so just as Jonathan and Kiera leave for their vacation. Don’t you think the timing of all of this is a little suspicious?

The timing may be interesting but not suspicious. Jonathan could have easily told Jake to move in at the same time he left for vacation.

If that’s what Jonathan wanted, why didn’t he have him move in sooner?

He didn’t have to. Kami was living with me at the time.

Is Kami trying to say Jake has other motives for moving in? No. That couldn’t be further from the truth.

Like Jake had said all those years ago, “She’s Jonathan’s kid sister. Nothing more. I

don't think of her like that."

Any hope of otherwise, I got out of my system a long time ago.

"He kissed me because he had too much to drink. He moved in because Jonathan told him to look out for me. What's there to be suspicious about?"

## Chapter Five

Jake

"Got a minute?" Nathan stands at the threshold of my office.

I look up from the pile of papers on my desk. "Yeah, man. What's up?"

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

He walks inside, closing the glass doors behind him. Whatever it is, it seems he'd prefer not to be overheard.

I rise from my seat. "If this is about me kissing your sister?—"

"I'm way past that," he growls. "I'm here to ask you about a certain piece of information I heard earlier today. Is it true you're living with my sister?"

Shit, this complicates things a bit.

I play it cool. "Nathan, you know how office gossip can be. Look, it was a poor joke I thought was funny at the time. That's all."

His face turns the same expression of anger as his brothers. He crosses his arms over his chest. "You know I'd believe you...if I didn't know you'd moved in yesterday."

"No, I didn't." I do my best to lie.

"Cut the crap, Hall. I overheard Mia and Kami talking about it at lunch. At first, I didn't want to believe it, but I decided to do some digging. You recently changed your primary address on your payroll. It's the same as Mia's."

Someone had to find out eventually. I just didn't expect it to be so fast. "It's not what you think."

"Not what I think?" He laughs. "You moved in with her and didn't tell my brother, or me, about it. On top of that, you have her convinced Jonathan put you up to it."

You've been fucking lying to my sister."

"But Jonathan did give me a job to do." I give him the same story I gave Mia.

He laughs. "Please. My brother may be overprotective of our little sister, but he's not that crazy."

"I'm just telling you what he?—"

"You may have Mia fooled but not me. I know you've had a thing for her for years."

He knew? No. He doesn't. He could be trying to manipulate me into telling the truth. "God no. She's always been like?—"

"A sister to you? You know as well as I do that's bullshit. You're not the only one with eyes. I've seen the way you look at her. Hell, you still look at her like that."

"Like what?"

"Like she's a snack you want to devour. Another potential notch on your bedpost."

I pause. "If you've known as long as you say you've had, why haven't you said anything to Jonathan? What's stopping you now?"

"I was hoping you'd be smart enough to come to your senses and stay away. Be the true friend I know you are. But clearly I was wrong."

A moment of silence falls between us. If he's caught me red handed, I'd expect him to blackmail me. To threaten me at least. "What do you want?"

"I don't want anything. I just can't, in good conscience, let you pursue my sister."

“Why? Because it breaks some bro code?”

“Because I know you. Once you’ve had her, you’ll break her heart. And my brother and I refuse to let that happen.”

That’s what they think of me? I shouldn’t be surprised. I let that be my reputation for years. But still, that truth fucking hurts. “So that’s what you think of me. Heartbreaker and player all around. The commitmentphobe, huh?”

“I’m familiar of your track record with women.”

“That was then. I want something better for my life now. Something long-term. With her.”

“I’m glad you’ve decided you want something that lasts, but I won’t let you have my sister if you’re using her as an excuse to play house.”

“I’m not playing games with her. I care very deeply about her.”

He pauses for a brief moment. “If you truly mean that, you’d stop trying to fuck her and get out of her life. Before it’s too late.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a warning. Trust me when I say this. You’d rather be dealing with me than Jonathan. I’m a much nicer version of him. I’m not the type to punch first and ask questions later.”

That may be true, but I’m still going to stand my ground. “Times have changed. We’re all older now. Mia is a grown adult who can take care of herself, not a helpless and fragile child.”

“Heed my warning, Jake. Once Jonathan finds out, there won’t be any stopping him.”

“So you plan to rat me out?”

“No. I’m giving you until Jonathan comes back from vacation for you to get out. No damage has been done yet. There’s still time to get out unscathed.”

He doesn’t understand. Until he’s found something worth fighting for, he’ll never understand. “I don’t want just a good fuck anymore. And I’m not going to set my feelings aside just because it helps Jonathan and you sleep better at night.”

“Fine. Do what you want. But when this all comes crashing down, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

What will Nathan do with this information in the meantime? If he won’t out me to Jonathan, what will he do? “Are you going to tell Mia on me?”

He scoffs. “Oh, hell no. This is not my monkey or my circus. I’m giving you the chance to figure out your own shit. I just hope you know what will be coming your way when Jonathan finds out.”

“I can manage Jonathan. And whether Mia wants to be with me or not is her decision.”

“Then I wish you the best of luck.” He turns to exit.

“If you didn’t come here to threaten me, then why are you warning me?”

He sighs, turning back to face me. “Trust me, I’m plenty angry at you. And if it weren’t for the fact Jonathan’s phone is off, I’d be telling him right now. But you’re also a good guy, Jake. The last thing I want to happen is for our friendship to end all because you decided to pursue my sister.”

“Jonathan does know she’s an adult, right? There’s also nothing in the company policy that says no fraternization.”

“Yes, he’s aware of both. But still, neither will matter to him. All he’ll be seeing is red. And once that happens, don’t be surprised if you end up with nothing.”

He’s right. I could lose my friendship, Mia, and even my place at the company in a matter of moments. Then again, I’ve known about the possibilities that I could end up with nothing since Mia was seventeen. And the more I think about making her mine, the more I don’t care. The more I’m willing to put everything on the line for this chance at winning her heart.

## Chapter Six

Mia

I stare at the reflection of myself from my bedroom mirror. This look is perfect. The curls in my hair give a soft, beach-wave look. My pale skin pops against my dark purple halter dress. It starts at my neck and ends with ruffles that come down to just above my knees. My black heels elongate my legs. A black purse completes the look.

“Perfect,” I say under my breath.

I turn my body to look over my shoulder and pop my heel like the princess of Genovia in *The Princess Diaries* movie when she experiences her first kiss.

“Damn, you look good.”

I jump from Jake’s sudden appearance at the threshold of my door. His tall stature takes up the entire door frame. One hand is in his dress pant pocket while the other is resting on the other side of the door frame. The blue tie I saw him wearing this morning is now gone. He must have just gotten back from the office.

How is it, even when he’s annoying me, he still finds a way to make my heart race? How does he manage to get under my skin?

He seems to be everywhere I look now.

He’s the first person I see when I make my morning coffee and perhaps the last one before bed. This is no doubt what Jonathan wanted. And Jake is more than happy to help do his bidding.

I find it strange how every time I remind myself of this, I feel more disappointed than I did the last time. But I shouldn’t read too much into that. I’ve known for a long time Jake will never see me as the woman I am.

I grab my phone from my bed and place it in my purse. “I don’t remember asking for

your opinion, but thanks.”

I try to leave the room, but he stands his ground, his stance unchanged.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

He scans me up and down.

“Is that for me?” He indicates to my appearance with a smirk.

I scoff. “You fucking wish.”

“Language, doll.” His voice lowers an octave. His facial expression turns serious.

He has my full attention. My heart races. Goose bumps crawl all over my body. Why does he have me on edge like this?

I shake my head, pulling myself from this trance. “Bite my ass,” I snap at him.

He shrugs. “Sure, if you’re into that sort of thing.”

Ugh. I cross my arms over my chest. “Why do you have to be such a pig?”

He lets out a chuckle. “You make it so easy.”

“Yeah? Well, that doesn’t mean I have to hear it. Now get out of my way.” I shove him with my body away from my door, gaining my freedom.

He follows. “Seriously though, what’s the occasion?”

I sigh. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m going to a birthday party.”

“Whose birthday? Anyone I should know?”

I pick up the gift bag I prepared ahead of time from the island. “It’s Josie’s. She’s come home to celebrate.”

“Your best friend from high school? Wow, that must be a blast from the past.”

He isn’t wrong. The last time I saw her was a few days before we both left for college. We had one last sleepover together. We’ve tried to keep in touch, but, of course, life happens. The fact she’s back in Dallas makes me excited to be with an old friend again.

“You remember her?”

“How could I not? You two were inseparable. There was hardly a day where she wasn’t over at your place.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, those were good times.”

Those moments seem like a distant memory. A lot has changed since then. No doubt she feels the same way.

I suddenly remember where I am and where I need to be. “I have to go.” I scan the area for my keys. “Crap, where did I put them?”

“I’ve got your car keys here.” Jake extends his hand to me. The keys sit in his large palm.

I never realized, until now, how large his hands are. I can’t help but think about those large hands all over my body. The things he could do. The pleasure... No. Stop it. Gosh, I need to get a hold of myself. My younger self needs a reality check. Jake and I will never happen, and I need that part of me to stop hoping. I need her to go away.

I grab the keys from his hand. “Thank you.”

I make the mistake of looking into his hypnotic eyes. Eyes that make my girl parts flutter.

What would it be like for him to hold me in his arms? In his bed?

I clear my throat. “I should be back around midnight or so.”

“I appreciate you telling me. Call me if you need anything okay?”

I nod, walking out the door.

His words warm my heart.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

Just because he cares doesn't mean he likes me in that way.

True. His drive to look after me goes against my hyperindependence, yet I can't help but secretly like it.

About fifteen minutes later, I arrive at the Italian restaurant Josie said to meet at. The night, despite being cold, is rather calm.

I walk through the front door of the crowded restaurant. The warmth of the place rushes over my body instantly despite being in the cold just moments ago.

I should have taken a warmer coat when I had the chance.

I walk to the hostess stand. "Hi, I'm meeting someone. She should already be seated. I think the party is under Jocelyn."

"Are you Mia Knight?" the hostess asks.

"Yes."

"We were told to be expecting you. Right this way."

I follow the older woman through the restaurant. We pass table after table of people. Some with families. Some on dates.

We enter a large private room, secluded from the rest of the restaurant by doors.

As she opens them, I'm greeted by four women. I scan their faces until my gaze locks on a familiar one.

"Mia!" Josie squeals, standing from her chair and all but running to me.

I meet her halfway, embracing her. "Josie! How are you?"

She has her bright blond hair styled in a cute high pony. She wears a short, pink, sequined, spaghetti-strapped minidress. The garment compliments her small waist and large bust. Her shoes are a bright hot pink.

"I'm good. I'm so glad to finally see your face. Oh my god, it's been too long."

"I know, right?"

Breaking from our hug, we walk over to the table.

"Everyone, this is my high school friend, Mia. Mia, this is Hannah, Emily, and Ashlyn. They were my roommates and besties in college. I don't think I would have survived without them," Josie introduces me to the three other women I don't recognize.

They all greet me with a smile.

Taking a seat beside Jocelyn at the rectangular table, we enjoy appetizers and pasta dishes. From jobs to exes, we spend a good hour talking about anything and everything.

"So are you dating anyone?" I ask my bestie when the other girls are in the middle of another conversation.

She blushes. “Unfortunately, I’ve had no luck in the dating department. All duds, I’m afraid.”

“I get you on that,” I sympathize. “How long are you in Dallas?”

“Honestly? I haven’t decided. I’ve been looking for a fresh start. Not sure where that is yet, but I figured I could go back to my roots for now until I do.”

She’s here indefinitely? “That’s awesome! Where are you staying?”

“With my parents for now until I can get a job.”

I have an idea. “If you want, I can talk to my brother about getting you a job interview. He’s been looking to hire more hands since his company has been expanding.”

“You’d do that for me?” She seems shocked.

“Absolutely.” There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for the people I love and care about.

“Thanks, girl!”

A little while later, we finish dessert, pay the check, and decide to enjoy the nightlife.

We dance our hearts out at this club nearby. Strobe lights are everywhere in the dark place. Bodies are on the dance floor and the bar. The DJ blasts one song after the next, keeping everyone dancing. Two drinks in and I begin to relax and let loose.

I’d go out more often, if Kami and Kiera weren’t busy with wedding plans.

I continue to dance the night away with Josie and her friends next to me.

“Ready for another?” I shout in Josie’s ear against the loud music.

“Hell, yeah,” she shouts back at me.

I give her a thumbs-up before walking up to the crowded bar. After a few minutes, I manage to get the bartender’s attention. “Two Lemon Drops, please.”

“Her drinks are on me.” I look over to a tall man standing next to me. Vance Shaw, my neighbor growing up, points to me as he talks to the bartender.

Though I didn’t know the Shaws that well, I did go to high school with Vance’s younger brother, Ryan. I was just starting freshman year of high school when Vance left for base camp to become a Marine. In my young eyes, I remember him as a guy with shaggy blond hair that covered his brown eyes. Now I look at him, and see nothing but muscle with a buzz cut that shows off his sharp jaw line, intense eyes,

and strong facial features.

He then turns his attention to me with a smile. “Hey, Knight.”

“Vance!” I’m stunned. Of all the people I could have run into... “Long time, no see.”

“You got that right,” he says as we give each other a brief hug. “How are you?”

“I’m good. What about you? What brings you here tonight?”

“You know, having fun with some friends. And you?”

“Same.”

“How have your brothers been? Last I heard, Jonathan was working on starting a company.”

“Yes. He and Jake run KH Industries.”

“Really? That’s fantastic.”

Our conversation is interrupted when the bartender sets two full glasses in front of me.

“Thanks for the drinks, by the way.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“How’s your brother?”

“Playing college football, currently.”

“Good for him.”

“Are you still living with your parents?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t in years. I’m living in an apartment not far from the city. I heard you joined the marines.”

He nods. “Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s amazing. Where are you currently stationed?”

He chuckles. “Nowhere right now. I’m home permanently.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Are you staying at your parent’s place?”

“For now. I’m looking to find a place of my own.”

“Makes sense.”

“What makes sense?” a familiar voice asks behind me.

No. You’ve got to be kidding me. That can’t be...

Reluctantly I turn around.

Jake winks. “Hey, baby girl.”

Chapter Seven

Jake

“Hey, baby girl.” I wink at Mia.

She looks somewhere between surprised and pissed off. “What the fuck are you doing here, Jake?”

“There’s no need for language.”

“The hell there isn’t. Did you follow me?” She braces her hands on her hips.

Yes and I'm not sorry. Especially when you look this sexy.

No way in hell was I going to sit at the front door and wait like a dog for her to come home. So I followed her from an Italian restaurant. I had to make sure she was safe, right? And that she wasn't meeting someone else at Josie's birthday party. The very thought of her with another man makes my blood boil.

This is what Mia meant when she said she wanted to be treated like an adult.

Which is the exact opposite of what I'm doing. Shit. I'm behaving too much like Jonathan. The only difference is I'm both selfish and hypocritical. But I'd rather be the one taking her out to dinner and devouring her behind closed doors.

Acting like her personal stalker isn't something to be proud of, but every minute I sat in that apartment and stewed was another wasted opportunity. It was another chance for some other guy to sweep her up.

Nope. Not happening.

From the restaurant, the birthday party—all female, thank god—caught an Uber to a crowded bar. So after following at a respectable distance, I found a parking spot, jogged to the nightclub, and tracked down Mia.

Her greeting probably shouldn't shock me at all.

“Just making sure you're safe.” Technically that's the truth, but she isn't wrong to be pissed.

“Well, now you know. You can leave.” She points to the door I just came through.

A smart man would make a tactical retreat. But I'm not that smart. “I don't know. I'm

having fun.”

She rolls her eyes. “At my expense? Fuck you. Go somewhere else if you’re looking for entertainment.”

“I’m good. Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?” I tense, looking up to find a guy hovering near her. He looks like a military reject and a gym rat had a baby, all nearly shaved head and bulked up with a five o’clock shadow and combat boots.

Who the hell is he? Someone she’s dating? Or thinking about hooking up with? Is this the kind of guy she’s attracted to?

She glares at me as she swallows her drink in one gulp. She then grabs a second one from the bar beside her.

“You might want to slow down there,” Mr. Buzz Cut warns her.

She snaps her angry stare from me to him. “When are men going to stop treating me like a child? I can do whatever the fuck I want. And besides, this one isn’t for me.”

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

If Mia understood where I was coming from, she'd know I'm not treating her like a child. Like Jonathan, I worry about her. But the difference is I worry because I want to love her.

She continues, looking to the other guy, "I'm going to hand my friend her drink and go to the bathroom." She turns back to me as he nods. "By the time I get back, I expect you to be gone. Are we clear?"

I sidle closer, my face inches from hers. "Whatever you say, baby girl."

With a growl, she huffs off. I watch her fine ass sway. Damn, she's even hotter when she's mad.

"What's the deal between you two?" the other guy sounds curious, but I don't care about answering his question.

I turn my attention to the cockblocker. "How do you know Mia?"

"What has she told you?"

He's answering my question with a question? Cagey... I don't like it.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I know jack shit about the people currently in Mia's life. Sure, I knew a pretty good amount from the past, but that was the past. If I want to win her over, I have to know what—and now whom—I'm dealing with.

"I'm going to take your silence as a 'nothing at all,'" the perceptive bastard says

before extending his hand. “I’m Vance.”

Reluctantly, I shake his hand. “Jake.”

Personally, I’d rather beat the shit out of him, but I have to make nice, especially since I have no clue what this guy means to Mia. The best thing I can do now is figure out my opponent—so I can eliminate him as competition.

“How long have you known Mia?” I try not to snarl the question.

“A while. Mia and I have a good relationship.” His smile isn’t smug...but it isn’t comforting, either.

A guy would only use the word “relationship” if he was referencing someone he’s dating. And if that’s the case...

Fuck. Why didn’t I know she was seeing this schmuck?

Despite my rising annoyance, I manage to play it cool. “I see. You two must be pretty close.”

He nods. “I’d say so.”

“How close?”

Vance smiles slowly. “You know... Close.”

The bastard isn’t budging. He knows I’m prying him for information. Time to get more specific. “Do you two go out often?”

Before he can answer, Mia returns. “Um, didn’t you agree just a few minutes ago to

leave?”

I inch closer to her until she lifts her chin to meet my gaze. I remain silent, despite her hot, angry glare. Damn her plump lips are right there. So close. All I have to do to kiss them right now is lean closer and bend...

I don't.

“So you're not going to say anything?” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Then this conversation is over.”

I start to see red. My hands curl into fists. I may have lost the battle, but I will win the war. I just need to go back to the drawing board. Vance is an unexpected wrench in my plan...but only for now.

## Chapter Eight

Mia

“Should I fuck him?” Jocelyn discreetly asks me in the car when Vance looks down at his phone.

“Not when you've just met him.” I shake my head.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Oh, c’mon. My girl parts are screaming, and he’s the first decent-looking guy I’ve talked to in a long time.”

“Nothing is screaming.” I laugh. “If you like him that much, I’ll give him your phone number.”

She turns giddy. “And that is why you’re the best!”

I shrug. “I try.”

Shortly after I had Jake leave, I introduced Vance to Jocelyn. The moment they locked eyes on each other, it was like watching a match catch fire. So quick, instant.

The more I watched them together, the longer the moment took my mind off the man I know is waiting at home for me. I don’t know whether to dread that fact or look forward to seeing him again.

I feel my blood practically boiling all over again. The audacity of that man... To follow me like I need supervision. So much for him treating me like an adult. He’s just as bad as Jonathan. To think I could trust him to keep his word, much less stay in his lane.

“Are you okay?” Vance’s question brings me back to reality.

“I’m fine.” I’m just plotting how delicious ways to tear Jake a new one.

He scoffs. “I know better than to believe a woman when she says she’s fine.”

“And you’re already the wisest man I know just for saying that,” Jocelyn praises him.

“Amen to that,” I agree with her.

He laughs. “If that’s one of the many ways to a woman’s heart, then so be it.”

Sometime later, the car stops in front of the Italian restaurant again. We all pile out, say our goodbyes, and begin to go our separate ways.

“I can drive you home, Vance,” I offer since he left his truck at the bar to come with me.

“Thanks.”

Exiting the parking lot, I start driving down the road.

“I meant what I said in the car earlier,” Vance says out of nowhere.

“What do you mean?”

“You say you’re fine, but I can see you’re thinking about something. Would that have anything to do with the friend you told to leave?”

I give him a polite smile, keeping my eyes on the road. “I appreciate your concern, but it’s really no big deal. Jake is just an overprotective watchdog Jonathan put on me. Nothing I can’t handle.”

“I remember him being like that when you were a kid, but you seem to take care of yourself just fine now.”

I chuckle. “That’s what I think, but you try telling him that. I’m guessing it’s some

older brother mentality bullshit.”

“As an older brother, I get where he’s coming from. But don’t you think having Jake follow you is a bit much?”

“Normally? Yes. But you’d be amazed the lengths my brother will go to make sure I stay safe.”

“How did Jake find out where you were anyway?”

I shrug. “I can only guess he’s been following me from the moment I left home to meet up with Josie.”

“Was he visiting you or something?”

“Sadly, no. He’s living with me.”

“What?” From the corner of my eye, I can see the shock spilling across his face.  
“Why the hell is he living with you?”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“My previous roommate moved out with her fiancé. And Jonathan, being as overprotective as he’s always been, decided Jake should move in to keep an eye on me. I had no control over any of it, and by the time I discovered their master plan, the paperwork had already been signed.”

As partners in crime, Jake and Jonathan are the equivalent to Batman and Robin. Jonathan is the brains while Jake is obviously the brawn.

Vance shakes his head, seemingly bewildered. “I suspected he had balls, but...wow. That explains a lot.”

“Believe me, I plan to have a few words with my brother.”

“I meant Jake.”

After stopping at a red light, I turn toward him. “Why? What do you mean it ‘explains a lot’?”

“After you went to the bathroom, we had an...interesting conversation.”

“How so?”

“It was almost amusing, actually.” He laughs. “He was asking questions about you and me. About our relationship.”

“Questions?” The nerve of that man. Not only can’t he stay out of my business, he also can’t leave the people around me alone.

“He wanted to know how close we are and what kind of relationship we have. I’d swear he was fishing to find out if we’re dating.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course he was.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

The light turns green, and I step on the gas. “He’s asking you those questions so he can relay the information to my brother. Believe me, there is nothing in my life that my brother doesn’t know about. It’s been that way from the time I was a kid.”

“I don’t know.” Vance shakes his head. “The way he was asking those questions, I didn’t get the vibe that he was gathering information. He sounded like someone who felt...threatened.”

“In what way?”

“The way a man who doesn’t want other men around his woman does.”

Is he saying what I think he’s saying? No. He can’t be. It’s not possible. “You’re wrong. Jake treats me like his best friend’s kid sister. Always has.”

“If that were the case, he would never have moved in with you.”

“Are you saying he’s lying to me?”

“I’m saying the reason he’s given you for moving in is bullshit.”

“I wish, but this has Jonathan written all over it. He’s always overstepped. And Jake seems more than happy to do his bidding.” I make a mental note to give Jake a stern talking-to when I get home.

“I’m just saying. A guy like Jake would never move in with a beautiful woman like you just to babysit. In fact, I’m willing to bet Jonathan has nothing to do with Jake moving in. Hell, he probably has no idea.”

Even if that were true, why would Jake lie to me? And if he is, why the hell would he move in with me in the first place? I can’t get ahead of myself or get my hopes up. This is Vance’s perspective, not fact or truth.

“You don’t look convinced.” Vance barges in on my thoughts. “But I know guy logic. The minute he saw me beside you, he started glaring daggers.”

“He was being a watchdog. A bit abrasive, but still a watchdog.”

“I know what I saw. And the way you looked at each other was like watching fireworks go off. The chemistry between you two was off the charts.”

“Chemistry?” I scoff. “There’s no chemistry. Far from it. I was angry at him, and he was dismissing how I felt. Again, to him, I’m just his best friend’s kid sister.” I accepted that fact a long time ago.

“Are you sure? Because it didn’t seem like he was dismissing you. I think he was teasing you. Maybe even flirting with you.”

“Are you saying he likes to get on my nerves on purpose? That sounds counterintuitive.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

He chuckles. “Not if he gets your attention.”

Did Vance not hear me? “You don’t understand. I’m a kid to Jake. He’s never liked me in the way you think and he never will. He’ll never see me sexually.”

Vance sends me another incredulous stare. “He’s living with you. And given the tension between you two tonight...I think you’re wrong.”

Maybe. But what if Vance is the one who’s wrong? In fact, there’s every chance he is.

Even so, I reflect back on my recent interactions with Jake. His teasing, our bantering, his aggravating ability to get on my nerves. Is it possible I’ve been misreading him?

That would mean he’s living with me for his own reasons. I’m not sure how to feel about that. Should I be flattered or horrified?

Neither. This is all just a big what if. But it’s consuming my thoughts. My questions multiply. And they have me craving answers.

Since Vance is staying temporarily with his parents, I pull up the curb in front their place, put the car in Park, and swivel to face him. “Sure, he likes to get on my nerves, but he doesn’t mean anything by it. Again, I’m a kid.”

“He wants you just as much as you want him.”

“I don’t want him.” My lingering feelings are just a schoolgirl crush, right?

“Sure you don’t.” He rolls his eyes.

“And he doesn’t want me.”

“You’re wrong. Let me prove it.”

“How?”

“Pretend you’re my girlfriend. Tell Jake we’re an item, and I can guarantee you, he’ll lose his absolute shit.”

Is Vance insane? “Why would I fake a relationship with you to prove a point?”

“Because, Mia, I think you’ve been lying to yourself. You aren’t acknowledging your feelings for him. Or the possibility that he has feelings for you.”

Ouch! “And if he doesn’t? Say I agree with your plan, and I tell Jake we’re dating. What if he doesn’t care?”

“Then nothing happens between you two, and you can bask in the knowledge that you were right. Then you can confront your brother and Jake until they respect your boundaries.” He shrugs. “You have nothing to lose.”

He’s right; I wouldn’t. If he’s wrong, I can go about life like normal, and no one will get hurt. But if his theory about Jake’s feelings are right... No. I refuse to get ahead of myself.

I’ll cross that bridge if I ever get there.

But why should I agree to this idea of his? I've managed to make a life for myself without Jake at the center. Why should I get my younger self's hopes up again when I most likely already know the outcome?

At the same time, I can't stop myself from feeling a cautious optimism.

"Say I agree to do this. What do you want in return?" No one in their right mind would do this merely out of the kindness of their heart.

"Other than to help you, could you put in a good word about me to Jocelyn?"

I knew there was a vibe between them.

That won't be a problem, but I see a snag in his plan. "If you intend on pursuing Josie, how are you going to be fake dating me at the same time? How will you explain our...agreement to her?"

"Leave that to me," he assures.

I hesitate. "How can you be so confident?"

"If there's one thing you should know about men, Mia, it's that they'll do crazy things when they want something badly."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

He has a point. Jonathan decided to pursue Kiera even though it put the company at risk. Ian posed as Kami's boyfriend without asking her first just so he could spend Thanksgiving with her. Who's to say Jake wouldn't do something just as jaw-dropping?

"Take this as food for thought and sleep on it," he adds. "But I'm willing to bet Jake will go to insane lengths—including moving in—to keep you in his sights."

### Chapter Nine

I park beside Jake's truck. The early morning is cold and still pitch black by the time I pull into the complex. Turning off my headlights, I kill the engine. I should climb out, but I find myself stuck and reflecting on the past few hours.

What do I do with all this newfound information, assuming it holds even a bit of truth? Did Jake move in with me for his own reasons, like Vance speculated? What do I do if he's right? So many questions, yet I worry about the answers.

A long time ago, I decided I wasn't going to let Jake Hall cloud my mind or influence my decisions anymore. Yet here I sit in the middle of the night, finding myself all but consumed by him again. The only difference now is I'm hesitating. Is this all wishful thinking...or does Vance's theory hold some merit?

Maybe I'd rather live in ignorance. And that kind of bliss is tempting. But don't I owe it to my younger self to find the truth? If this is the chance to finally put the past to rest, to find closure, shouldn't I take it? The more I think about it, the more my stomach ties itself in knots.

Vance is right; I need to sleep on this.

After closing the car door behind me, I lock it and start up the stairs. My thoughts cease when I notice the kitchen light shining brightly behind the closed blinds. Did Jake wait up for me?

“No,” I mutter aloud. “I must have left it on.”

Despite rationalizing to myself, I can’t stop yearning for a much different conclusion.

When I open the door, Jake stands at the threshold. “Good. You’re home. I was getting worried.”

What’s that supposed to mean? Ugh, I’m too tired to play twenty questions. Regardless of his motives, he had no business following me, much less interrogating Vance. He’s not off the hook for that.

“What’s your problem?” I snap.

He blinks. “What do you mean?”

I scoff as I walk through the door, then close it behind me, reaching down to peel off my uncomfortable high heels as I do. “You know damn well what I mean. Why did you follow me and interrogate my friends?”

As I tug at the second of my stilettos, I lose my balance. I’m falling when I suddenly feel strong hands grip my elbow and shoulder.

Suddenly, Jake is holding me, his face inches from mine. I gasp. His hazel eyes bear into my soul. I can’t help but drink in every detail. His sharp jawline, his tempting lips, the flare of his nostrils, and his hot drill of a stare.

What would happen if I kissed him?

His grip on me is gentle but firm, both powerful and capable. Are those sparks between us? I don't know, and I can't do this to myself. What if I'm wrong? What if our seemingly mutual attraction is actually one-sided? I'm not ready to take a leap of faith.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I pull myself from his grasp. "I'm fine. Thanks."

"Any time."

Right. I shake my head. Back to what I'm trying to say. "Anyway, you had no right?—"

"To follow you around and interrogate your friends. Yes, I understand that. I just?—"

"Worried about me. Right." Like I haven't heard that before. "Does this mean you won't do it again?"

"No," he says with zero hesitation.

I put my hands on my hips. "Why not?"

"I need to make sure you're safe."

Of course. Jonathan told him to. As always, I'm the kid sister...

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Translation, you’re snooping on my personal life so you can give my nosy brother all the dirt.”

“That doesn’t stop me from worrying about you myself. I care about you.”

Like a brother.

I scoff. “I already have two older brothers looking out for me. I certainly do not need a third.”

“That’s not my intention.”

“But you and my brother are going to consider everyone I socialize with a potential threat?”

“Not necessarily.”

“So what you’re saying is that Vance is the only one on your radar. Heaven forbid another man I’m not related to comes within a few feet of me.” I roll my eyes.

“Being cautious isn’t bad,” Jake argues. “How well do you know him?”

“Well enough for me to tell you to take a long walk off a short pier.”

“Now you have me curious.” Despite my efforts, he doesn’t seem deterred.

“Jake,” I warn. “You are this close?—.”

“To you, I hope.” Suddenly, he’s disturbingly near. His warm breath drifts across my skin. His body nearly touches mine. We’re almost embracing. And other than my heart thudding between my ears, the whole world around us has gone silent.

The absolute audacity of this man. I shake my head. “I’m going to bed.”

He tightens his hold on my arm so I can’t escape. “I ask because I want to make sure he isn’t playing you. If you’re serious about this relationship, he should be, too.”

When is my brother going to wake up and realize I’m not as fragile as he thinks?

I yank from Jake’s grasp. “I’m done with you and my brother thinking I’m a porcelain doll. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you’re more than capable. But that doesn’t mean you’re the Hulk.”

“I’m not, but I’m also not so fragile that I’ll break at any second. I never should have trusted you to keep your word.”

“So I’m not allowed to worry about you?”

“There’s a fine line between worrying about me and treating me like a child.”

“You were at a club. Anything could have happened.”

“I know the dos and don’ts of a place like that.”

He scowls. “Do you? The number of men staring at you was concerning.”

“So what if I get a little male attention?”

“It’s more than that, and you know it.”

I know where he’s going with this. I get it, but he shouldn’t care this much. “I was with other people. I was covering my drinks with my hand, and I never let my glass out of my sight. I assure you, no one was going to drug me.”

“Do you know—and trust—Vance enough to not take advantage of you?”

“Yes.” Jake talks about Vance like he’s the enemy. “What do you have against him? You barely know the guy.”

“Then enlighten me. Who is he to you? How long have you known him? How serious is your relationship?”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

Suddenly, I understand this isn't about my safety. Jake thinks I'm dating Vance. Though all Vance and I did was talk, Jake clearly assumes we're doing way more. Why does it matter so much to him?

"My personal life isn't any of your concern." I'm about to continue speaking when I hesitate. I could tell Jake he's wrong—on so many levels. His idea of my relationship with Vance couldn't be further from the truth. But if he's going keep pushing, then fuck him. I'll give him exactly what he wants. "And if you're going to persist in knowing everything about my life, then yes, I'm in a relationship with Vance. There. What do you have to say about that?"

Jake looks taken aback, as though he wasn't expecting my "confession." But honestly, what did he expect? I told him what he seemingly wanted to hear.

Then why does he look disappointed, almost crestfallen?

A long silence stretches between us, the moment turning awkward. I clear my throat. "I'm going to bed. Good night."

I turn away and slam into my room without another word, leaving Jake gaping after me, alone.

## Chapter Ten

Jake

"Jesus, man. You look like shit." From behind the bar, Ian sends me a concerned

stare as I drag myself into his bar at the end of my long work day.

“Feel like it, too.” I sigh.

“Your usual?” he asks.

I nod before taking a seat on one of his stools and loosen the navy tie around my neck.

From the moment Mia told me she was seeing Vance, I haven’t felt like myself. I tossed and turned all night, which didn’t help. I’m a fucking mess, and I don’t know what to do.

A few moments later, Ian returns with a scotch in hand and places the glass in front of me. “Rough day?”

“‘Rough’ is an understatement.”

He pauses. “This have anything to do with Mia?”

I try to hide my surprise, but I’m pretty sure it’s all over my face. “What makes you ask that?”

“You kissed her on New Year’s Eve. Everyone saw. Also, Kami likes to talk.”

“I was drunk that night. And Kami, no offense, needs to mind her own business.”

He laughs. “If you’re afraid I’ll rat you out to Jonathan, don’t be. We may be friends, but I don’t owe him anything, especially information about you and Mia. And I operate under strict bartender-customer confidentiality.”

One of the best things about Ian? He listens, but he doesn't involve himself in other people's drama.

I sigh. "Be honest. Am I in over my head?"

"No. But it's pretty reckless to pursue your best friend's sister and not tell him."

"Trust me, I'm well aware of it." And sometimes, I feel like a shit.

"Based on the fact you're here and not with her, I'd say things aren't working out the way you planned."

"Far from it." I swallow my drink whole. "How about another?"

Ian refills my drink. "Are you really surprised?"

I shouldn't be. Of course she's in a relationship. Only a fidiot wouldn't notice her.

"Surprisingly, yes."

"How so?"

I tell Ian everything that's happened over the past two days.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

When I finish, Ian frowns. “Huh. I didn’t think she was seeing anyone.”

“I didn’t, either.” And the news is fucking with my head.

“I’m willing to bet she has no idea how you feel.”

“Since she sees me living with her as an intrusion, I can’t exactly tell her.”

Ian shrugs. “Then you’ll need to convince her otherwise. Based on what Kami has told me, Mia has never liked Jonathan meddling in her life. Since you’re his bestie, you’re guilty by association.”

“Exactly. It doesn’t help that I moved in with Mia. As merely her roommate, but...”

“Does Jonathan know?”

I wince. “Not yet.”

“Oh, shit. Dude, when are you going to tell him?”

That’s another wrinkle I need to figure out. “Soon. Just...not now. Once I do, he’ll watch me like a hawk and never let me be alone with Mia again.”

I hate keeping Jonathan in the dark, but there’s no other way.

“Yeah. If I were Mia’s big brother, those are definitely things I’d do.”

I nod. “When Jonathan does find out, I’d rather be the one to tell him.”

“That’s noble, but it probably won’t stop him from wanting to rip your balls off.”

“Not gonna lie. I’m worried about that.”

“What do you plan to do about the boyfriend in the meantime?”

What can I do? I can’t get rid of him, especially if it means losing more of Mia’s trust. “Other than try to spend more time with her, I don’t know.”

“I have a suggestion...but this will take time.”

“I’m open to ideas.” I shrug, drinking more of the liquid goodness.

“Wine and dine her.”

I scowl. “I’m not following.”

“Obviously, with another guy in the picture, you can’t ask her out on a date.”

“Yeah,” I grouse.

“But you can offer her your time.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?”

He shakes his head. “Have you ever gone fishing?”

“Once. Not really my thing.”

“But you know that to catch fish you need bait, right?”

“What does this have to do with winning her heart?” I wish he’d get to the point.

“Make her breakfast, help her with her laundry, watch a chick-flick or two with Mia. Be there with and for her. Be friendly, but not too friendly. Show her what life would be like if you were her boyfriend, minus the horizontal tango.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

The more I think about this strategy, the more I'm not so keen. "But wouldn't that give her more ammo to friend zone me?"

"Not necessarily. For her to be yours, you have to become the person she relies on—for anything and everything. And to get there, you have to prove you're solid."

"And if she knows she can rely on me, then I've gained her trust." And maybe her heart. Why the fuck didn't I think of that?

"Bingo!"

And all the while, she'll learn more about me and feel how it would feel if there was an us. Ian is a genius. "Where should I start?"

"I know you, Jake. You have the innate ability to improvise and ultimately get what you want. You'll figure it out."

I slowly nod, wracking my brain for ideas. And then one hits me. "Know a good pizza place nearby?"

### Chapter Eleven

Mia

Work fails to stop me from replaying last night's events in a never-ending loop. From the beginning to the end, all I can think about is my exchange with Jake and that stunned expression on his face. Why would he look at me that way? I told him what

he seemingly wanted to hear...

But what if it wasn't?

Ugh, I'm so confused. Why would he twist our conversation into making me admit I'm dating Vance if that isn't what he wanted to hear?

Jake didn't force me; I chose to lie to him.

Okay, but what was I supposed to do? He had me feeling cornered, and he wouldn't get off my back. He seemed so convinced I was in a relationship with Vance. I thought that was what he wanted to hear. Now I'm not sure.

Regardless, this is a total mind fuck. Why does Jake care so much about my love life? Is this another trick so he can report all the dirt back to my brother...or is there more to the story? And why do I feel guilty?

My phone rings, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance at the caller ID. Vance. Just the person I need to talk to. The one who planted this seed of doubt in my head in the first place. The one who can help me make sense of this mess? God, I hope.

"Hi, Vance," I answer.

"Hey, Knight. How are you doing?"

"I...don't know."

"Long day at work? Or something else bothering you?"

"Definitely something else."

“What happened? Spill.”

I sigh. “Actually, I’m not sure.”

“Huh?”

“It’s...Jake related.”

“So you told him we’re ‘dating’.”

How did he guess? “I had no choice.”

I spend the next few minutes telling him about the odd argument Jake and I had last night when I got home. I even admit I feel guilty for lying.

When I’m finished, he laughs. “You’re in to him. I get it.”

“I can’t be.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“You are. You always have been, and you’ll never stop. You might as well accept that.”

“That’s harsh.”

“But true. As for your argument, I’m not surprised at the way it unfolded. I’m especially not surprised by his reaction.”

He isn’t? “Why?”

“Because it proves my theory.”

“It does not. You said he’d lose his mind. He didn’t.”

“If you and I turn up the heat on our ‘relationship,’ he will. Give him time.”

“I don’t understand.” Trying to comprehend this conversation is like trying to untangle some crazy mental Jenga.

“I’m telling you, he cares for you more than he lets on.”

More than platonically? That’s Vance’s intimation. My heart flutters at the thought. I thought I gave up this feeling and shut away my heart a long time ago. Why can’t I control it now, the way I did then?

“He can’t. He shouldn’t.” If Vance is right, my brother will lose his shit.

“But he does,” he insists. “Did you and Jake talk any this morning?”

“No. I left for work early.” I did that mainly to avoid any awkwardness. I couldn’t face Jake. In my head, untangling whatever’s going on between us was a future-me problem. Unfortunately, the future is here, and present-me doesn’t appreciate my procrastination. Crap.

“Are you heading home soon?”

“In a few minutes. Why?” I can’t hide in my office forever. Sadly, office policy prohibits staying here overnight.

“Go home and watch what he does. Study the way he interacts with you. And if it feels right to be around him, don’t fight it. If you do, you’ll regret it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I lost someone I cared about once, and I never got the chance to tell her how I felt. By the time I found the courage, it was too late.”

“I’m sorry. But I’m not you, Vance.”

“Nope, and I don’t want you to be. I’m just saying that I’m on your side.”

My urge to run from my growing feelings for Jake is there. But along with that urge comes another. This one insists I stay and embrace what could be a fantasy fulfilled. The feelings I thought I squashed long ago are blooming again, and I don’t know how to control it.

“I’m grateful for your advice, but I’m sure you didn’t call to hear me go on and on about my problems.”

“Well, I called to check on you, but also to thank you. Josie and I are having dinner tonight.”

I just texted Vance Josie’s phone number this morning. He works fast.

“It was the least I could do.” Especially when he’s given me so much food for thought. “Enjoy your date. Oh, she likes the color pink.”

“Good to know because I got her pink roses.”

Smart man. “Have fun. Enjoy your night. Bye!”

“Bye.” He hangs up.

And I’m left with my thoughts.

As I gather my stuff to leave the office, I continue my thoughts where I left off. The more I’m around Jake, the more I wrestle with my inner turmoil. Do I let go of my fears and tell him how I feel? Should I let myself hope he feels the same way about me? Or would I be better off keeping my feelings to myself?

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

I feel as though there's this body of water I want to jump into, but I'm afraid because I only kinda-sorta know how to swim. What if it's not safe? What if I drown? What if Jake is a shark who will swallow me whole?

On the other hand, one question circles my brain like a whirlpool and convinces me to take a leap a faith: what do I have to lose?

### Chapter Twelve

Mia

When I walk into my apartment, I smell pizza. The delicious aroma is strong and too good to resist. But who ordered Italian?

Wait, that's a dumb question. I know exactly who.

"Welcome home, baby girl." Jake gives me a devilish grin when I clear the threshold.

I could protest his nickname for me again, but I'm too exhausted and too hungry to care. Besides, it's more important I figure out what he's up to.

"What's this?" I scan the kitchen, gaping at the garlic knots, pizza, and cinnamon sticks spread across the island.

"I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of grabbing dinner for us."

"I don't mind at all. But...why?"

“Can’t a friend get another friend some dinner?”

He asks the question like he wants to be my pal. He doesn’t sound remotely jealous that I have a “boyfriend.”

Dammit.

“So you did this out of the kindness of your heart?”

“I figured we earned it. I don’t know about you, but the first day back in the office after the holiday felt endless. I thought we’d both enjoy this.”

He’s not wrong. So why am I disappointed? God, I’m confused. I either want him or I don’t. I need to make up my mind. Why can’t I already?

Whatever. I’m too hungry to turn down pizza. If I hadn’t skipped breakfast and eaten so little lunch, I’d have a stronger will to say no.

“Just one slice.” Where’s the harm in sharing food, right?

“Perfect.” He plucks a bulging bag of popcorn from the microwave and shakes it.  
“Do you like popcorn?”

“With the pizza?”

“Yeah,” he says as if it’s obvious.

“Do you?”

“Absolutely.” He smiles, pouring the contents of the hot bag into a large, metal bowl.

In all the years I've known Jake Hall, I never knew he liked popcorn with his pizza.

Of course I didn't. Until recently, I hadn't talked to him in years.

"Since when?"

"I worked with this client from L.A. once. We started talking and got on the subject of pizza," he says as he grabs two plates and napkins. "Long story short, he tells me that the next time I have pizza, I should try it with popcorn. So one night I did, thinking he was crazy. But when I took a bite of both, it was the perfect combination."

"You're crazy."

"Wouldn't be the first time you thought that, huh?"

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

I shake my head in amusement. “What type of pizza did you get?”

“Deep dish pepperoni and mushroom.”

At his answer, I salivate. My favorite.

“Based on that hungry expression, I’m going to assume you’re good with my choice.”

“More than good. Thanks.”

He nods, and we spend the next few minutes piling food on our plates. The two large slices Jake insists I eat take up my entire plate. Then he piles popcorn on top before we sit at the kitchen table.

“Bon appétit.” Jake grins as he sets the large bowl between us.

I can’t help but moan as I grab one of my slices and take the first delectable bite. The more I chew, the more I feel like I’ve just consumed a slice of heaven. “Oh, my god. So good. Yes...”

“You sound like you’re having a moment with your pizza. Should I leave you two alone?” he teases.

I swat his arm playfully as I swallow the bite. “We are, so don’t ruin it for us.”

“Oh, I would never,” he says dramatically.

I roll my eyes, trying not to laugh. This is fun. This is nice. When was the last time I enjoyed pizza and good conversation with a friend?

He's not my friend.

Right. He's...complicated. But at least for tonight, things between us can be simple.

I hope so.

Jake cuts into the brief silence. "How was your day?"

"Tough but manageable. How about yours?"

"Same. Today felt like four Mondays. I can't wait until Friday."

"I wish it was tomorrow," I groan. "What are your plans this weekend?"

He shrugs. "Not sure. I'll figure something out."

I never took Jake for a homebody. "No 'Saturdays are for the boys'?"

"Nah. I don't party like I used to in college. Those days are long over."

"Amen to that. "

He raises a brow. "Clubs aren't your bag?"

"Occasionally, I go with Kami or Kiera, but we haven't in some time. Josie's birthday was a rare exception."

"Hmm. So...I guess you go out with Vance more these days?"

Since Jake thinks I'm dating the guy, I suppose that's a valid assumption. What surprises me, however, is the fact he's actually asking. Sure, it's possible he's probing so he can give Jonathan information...but the way Jake is asking makes me wonder if both Vance and Kami are right. Is he digging for his own personal reasons? If that's true, could this pizza and this conversation be his attempt to get closer to me? Maybe I'm wrong. Hell, maybe I'm crazy, but I want to figure this out.

"Some." I do my best to lie. "But not much, really. He's more of an introvert."

"I get that. But you two have plans this weekend," he says like he's sure of it.

I could lie. I could tell him we do. But why does he want to know so badly?

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Actually, we don’t.”

He looks surprised. Almost excited. But as quickly as his smile springs up, he flattens it back to a neutral expression. “Any particular reason?”

“He’s been so busy with work, it’s hard for him to get away.”

“I understand that.” He pauses. “Well, we could do something after work on Friday.”

Jake wants to spend time with me? “You want to?”

“Why not? I think it’d be fun doing stuff together. As friends, of course.”

Of course. He thinks I’m dating someone else. “I’d like that.”

Should I have lied and told him I was busy with Vance? Maybe, but a part of me wants to see what Jake plans. Something about being near him feels good. It feels right. Hiding from him won’t get me the answers I want.

“Good.” He smiles.

I pause. “What do you have in mind?”

“Why don’t you let me cook for you? I make a mean stir fry.”

“Sounds yummy,” I reply. “You’re on.”

We spend the next few hours in the living room talking about anything and everything. We laugh. We get philosophical. It feels cozy. Intimate. Easy. I don't realize it's almost midnight until I see the clock on the wall.

"Crap, is that the time?"

He turns to the clock. "Oh, damn. We should probably hit the hay, huh?"

"Yeah." I stand. "Thank you for tonight. This was fun."

"Of course." He stands with me. "Did you get enough to eat?"

"Yes, and then some." I laugh as I start down the hall to my bedroom, Jake trailing behind me. "I can't wait for lunch."

"When lunch is leftover pizza, hell, yeah."

When I reach my bedroom door, I turn to face him. "Do you need help with the dishes? I'm sorry; I just remembered we piled them all in the sink."

He shakes his head. "I'll take care of it. Get some sleep."

"Right. Okay, thanks." I should say good night, yet I hesitate. I'm so nervous, I can't help but look down at my feet.

He hooks a finger under my chin. I swear I feel my heart skip a beat. How does this man keep confusing me? "Good night, baby girl."

Jake has called me that nickname so often, one hundred percent of the time to tease me. Now he's using it as a term of endearment? And I like it? Yes. This is serious.

“G-good night.” I turn from his touch, something I regret the minute I walk through my bedroom door and close it behind me.

A part of me wishes he followed me and crawled into my bed—preferably naked—and patted the sheet beside him, his eyes full of hot expectation. The more I imagine the scene, the more I burn for his touch. What the hell is going on between us?

Is what I’m feeling actually real? And does he have feelings for me? If so, how soon will the other shoe drop? Dread mixes with excitement. The last time I let myself want Jake Hall, it didn’t end well. How do I make sure it ends differently now?

## Chapter Thirteen

January 6

Mia

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“He brought you dinner? Sounds promising.” Kami sounds giddy for me as I tell her about my “date” with Jake.

I never expected him to order pizza, much less invite me to eat with him. I enjoyed every second of it. The longer we talked, the closer to the surface my burning need bubbled. It’s something I’ve never felt. And the more I thought about luring him to my bed, the harder it became to ignore that feeling. Something has changed between us. Everything feels different.

Is this my younger self refusing to let go of the past? Maybe. And I probably just need to move on.

But I feel stuck on Jake Hall.

I invited Kami to lunch, hoping to vent what I’m thinking and feeling. What I’m getting from her instead is a disagreement, which is about to turn into a full-blown argument.

“It was a friendly gesture, not a romantic, five-course meal.”

“Still...he bought dinner for two. Last night was absolutely a date.”

No. Why would he order food for two on purpose? “Maybe he accidentally ordered extra. Or maybe wanted enough for leftovers, but when I walked in, he was too polite to tell me to find my own food.”

Kami sighs, a sound rife with frustration. I’m not surprised. We’ve been going in

circles the past twenty minutes. “Mia, my love, open your eyes. He ordered enough for you, too. So you would spend time with him. Hell, all he’s done—the moving in and all that—has been for you. Last night was a date. He’s into you. Hell, he’s mad for you.”

I shake my head. Yeah. Right. “He’s not. I know for a fact he’s not.”

“Yeah? How do you know that?”

“Jake made it very clear we’re friends. He’s going to make dinner for me tonight—as friends. What I’m feeling is ridiculous and one-sided.”

This feeling will pass...eventually.

She shrugs. “I think he’s lying about tonight. Because I highly doubt what you’re feeling is one-sided.”

“Listen, I overheard him say to his friends that he’s not interested in me romantically.”

“How long ago was that?”

“I’d just turned eighteen. His exact words were, ‘She’s Jonathan’s kid sister. Nothing more. I don’t think of her like that.’” What a curse to remember that moment so clearly, as though it were ingrained in my brain. Of all the things I remember, that terrible night is so vivid.

“You were a teenager. Of course he said that. Besides, you may not have had his attention then, but you certainly have it now. And I think you’ve had it from the moment you started working at KH Industries. He wouldn’t have moved in with you otherwise.”

“He didn’t move in because he wanted to. He did it because Jonathan told him to.”

She rolls her eyes. “C’mon, you really believe that?”

“Yes. My brother always has something up his sleeve.”

“But that doesn’t mean Jake would just go along with Jonathan. He’s not your brother’s lap dog.” Kami sets down her sandwich. “That’s it. I’m calling for a one-on-one, woman-to-woman intervention. If Jonathan wanted someone to look after you, the last person he’d ask would be his best friend. Why not Nathan?”

“Because Nathan probably said no. He’s all about taking care of me, but not to the extent Jonathan is.”

“If Jonathan asked Jake to babysit you, don’t you think Nathan would give you a heads-up?”

“Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know.” She has a point. If Jonathan had asked Nathan to be my keeper, Nathan would have told me. “But maybe that’s why Jonathan went to Jake, because he knew Nathan would tell me.”

“If Jonathan demanded Jake move in with you, why did Jake wait until the last minute to tell you?”

“Because Jonathan knew I’d fight it.”

“If Jonathan told Jake to look after you, then why did he kiss you on New Year’s?”

“We went over that. He was drunk.”

Kami sends me a skeptical glare. “Ian told me Jake nursed one beer all night. He

wasn't drunk.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Maybe he’s a light weight.” But I know my answer is weak.

This time her sigh is full of exasperation. “Mia, at some point you have to stop lying to yourself. There’s a big difference between what your brother’s best friend would do and what a man pursuing a woman would do. If Jake is merely your keeper, would he kiss you and bring you dinner?”

Kami’s arguments are solid and valid. Lately, I’ve forced myself to consider Jake as nothing more than my brother’s friend doing my brother’s bidding. If I let myself think of him in any other light, I’ll lose my head, like I did when I had a crush on him years ago. I can’t do that. I can’t put my heart at risk.

But now I’m struggling to view Jake’s actions through a platonic lens. My heart wants to say the one word I can’t. The word I swore I’d never feel for Jake again. The word I can’t bear to even think.

Love.

Maybe I’m not meant for it. Not cut out for it.

“Mia.” Kami pulls me from my thoughts. “He’s in?—”

“Don’t.” I stop her because, despite what she thinks, Jake isn’t in love with me. “He’s not. We’re both blowing a New Year’s kiss and a shared pizza completely out of proportion.”

“You’re not. You’re in love, too.”

My eyes sting with tears I do my best to sniff back. “I’m not. I can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not real. I’m not the girl a guy like Jake falls for.”

Kami’s shocked expression softens to sympathy. “Mia, everyone deserves to have the love of their life.”

I shake my head. “My heart leads me astray every time. It’s stuck on this one man. I can’t trust myself. Especially now.”

She takes my hand in hers. “There was a time I would have agreed with you. I wanted nothing to do with love because it had betrayed me so many times. But then Ian came along, told me I was wrong, and did everything in his power to make sure my stubborn ass knew he loved me. I won’t deny I protested, both to him and to myself. You would not believe the lengths I went, trying to get rid of him. My point is, you deserve love. Sometimes, you have to be brave to be in love. Your heart may get broken along with way, but that doesn’t mean you don’t deserve it. Don’t fight what you’re feeling. You’ll only hurt yourself in the process.”

Could what Kami went through with Ian be similar to my situation? “You don’t know that.”

“But I do. I see the way Jake looks at you. And I’ve seen you around him enough times to know the feelings are mutual.”

“Looks at me how?”

“The way every woman in the world wants to be looked at by the man they love. You may argue with him a lot, but I know you two have a connection. And no man, drunk

or otherwise, kisses a woman like that unless he has feelings for her, especially with the history you two have.”

I hesitate. Is it really possible my feelings aren't unrequited? If Kami believes they're not, shouldn't I give her the benefit of the doubt? Maybe... I want to see what she's been seeing for myself. Is the possibility not as crazy as I originally thought?

## Chapter Fourteen

Jake

After spending the whole morning and afternoon replaying Tuesday night in my head, I'm dying to know what's going on in Mia's head. Did she enjoy that night like I did? What's she thinking? Feeling? Has her attitude toward me changed for the better? If so, how soon can I come clean to her about what's in my heart?

Vance is still in the picture.

Not for long if he barely gives her the time of day. I mean, what guy doesn't take his girl out on the weekends? Or at least spend time with her? Whatever the reason, he's a real shitty boyfriend. I don't know what kind of person Vance is, and I won't pretend that I do, but if he truly cared for her, he'd spend as much time with her as possible. At least I would.

All the more reason to take this opportunity and convince her she belongs with me.

I'll figure out what to do with Vance later. Right now, my main priority is finding information on Mia. I know women talk. I know Mia and Kami had lunch together. So what better person to get information from than from the person she's more than likely to be confiding in?

“Oh, it’s the man with a plan. What can I do for you today?” Kami jokes, tucking her fist under her chin.

“How are you?”

“Spectacular.” Her sarcastic tone is obvious. “What about you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

How do I ask this without her getting suspicious? I clear my throat. “I’ve got this...friend.”

She gasps dramatically. “You have friends besides Jonathan? I could have sworn he was the big spoon to your little.”

I frown. “Has Ian ever told you you’re a brat?”

“Loud and proud.” She grins. “So what about your friend?”

“Well, he likes one of your friends.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“Someone who works here, but you wouldn’t know him.”

“Okay. And which friend does he like?”

God, this is harder than I thought it was going to be. “Mia. He heard you two have lunch together, and he wanted me to ask you?—”

She bursts out laughing. “I have to stop you there. You look so miserable right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You want to know if Mia told me about your little dinner the other night.”

I groan to myself. “Yes.”

“She did.”

“And?”

“Careful there, Hall. You’re coming off a bit like a stalker asking me that question,” she teases.

I roll my eyes. No, I’m not. “Can’t a friend worry about another friend?”

“Let’s be honest. You want to be more than that.”

Now she’s just yanking my chain.

She softens. “There’s no need to coax information out of me. I know when a man is pursuing a woman. Ian did the exact same thing with me.”

“Can you tell me what she said?”

“If it means her happiness? Yes. But don’t fuck it up.”

“Not my plan.” I look around us to make sure no one is listening. “Did she say anything interesting?”

She laughs. “You’re so cute right now. I should take a picture.”

“Seriously, Kami?” She’s enjoying every minute of this.

She laughs. “I’m just messing with you. Yes, she did. And she had a lot to say.”

I perk up with excitement. “Tell me.”

“I can’t break girl code, but I can say you have her attention. And she really liked the dinner you arranged.”

Ian was right, playing the friendly, but not too friendly, card did the trick. There is something between us. She feels something for me, like I do for her. I just need more time to prove to her that we’re right together.

Hell, yeah.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Did she say anything else?”

She hesitates. “Mia is a sea of emotions. She should be the one to tell you about them. All I can say is that she needs reassurance. Find some way to get her to lower her guard, and I think she’ll open up.”

Get her guard down? “How do I do that?”

“You’re the co-CEO of a major company. Use your imagination.”

Easier said than done. “I’ve tried to get her to open up. She’s a tough one to crack.”

“I agree with you on that. But at some point, you will get to her. Be patient, but tread carefully.”

“Would it be safe to say her boyfriend won’t be a problem?” The last thing I want is for her boyfriend to come barging in and trying to beat the shit out of me for hitting on his girl.

“Vance?” She shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s serious, but I wouldn’t put her on the spot about him. I have a feeling, when it comes to Vance, everything will sort itself out.”

“I hope so.” He’s a thorn in my side I’m ready to pluck out.

“Wow. You are so jelly right now.” She laughs. “It’s adorable.”

I choose to ignore her poking. “I just know what I want.”

From the moment she turned seventeen, I’ve wanted Mia. Always. She’s who I’ve imagined myself with. Sure, I’ve occupied myself for many years with other women. But I spent time with them merely to pass the time and dull the ache I feel for Mia. I tried to turn off my desire and snuff out my longing. But my feelings stayed the same. Seeing her again for the first time in years proved it.

“When you said to tread carefully, what did you mean?”

“Be careful with Mia.” She pauses. “Her feelings about love and relationships are...complicated.”

“In what way?”

“When I said she and Vance probably aren’t serious, I don’t mean they’re incompatible.”

“Are you saying she’s dating him for the wrong reasons?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then what?” Why the riddles?

“Get her to talk to you, and I promise you’ll have your answers. Maybe not all right away, but she’ll tell you everything when she’s ready,” Kami assures.

Mia is one of the most wonderful people I know. She’s also the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. I’d be the luckiest man in the world to have her be mine.

I just have to get her to talk to me...somehow.

## Chapter Fifteen

Jake

The smell of soy sauce is pungent throughout the small kitchen. Steam rises high from the pan as I cook the stir fry for a few more minutes. After only taking twenty minutes to cook, the food is almost ready.

“That smells so good!” I hear Mia behind me. She moves in beside me to inspect the food.

I smirk. “Wait until you taste it.”

“I hope it tastes as good as it smells.”

“Believe me, it will,” I assure her.

Just a few minutes later, I dish out the contents of the pan into two large bowls. After that, I fill two stem glasses with pinot blanc.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Dinner is ready,” I say as I set our food and drinks on the table. “Prepare to be amazed.”

She raises her glass. “To the weekend.”

“To...letting loose.” I clink my glass with hers.

Even though we’d planned this ahead of time, I have other motives for tonight. I need to get her to talk to me. And if I want her to do that, I’m hoping a few glasses of wine will get her to relax. Maybe that will get her to open up about her feelings. Maybe more.

A brief moment passes between us as we both take a sip of the wine. The fruity flavor is just what this dish needs.

“This wine is delicious,” she says with a moan.

“Glad to know my taste tester approves.” I smile.

“Not just approve. This slaps.”

What? “Slaps?”

“I mean it’s good. Excellent. Chef’s kiss.” She gestures with her hand like an Italian chef proclaiming his work is perfection.

“I can’t keep up with slang anymore.”

“How often are you on social media?”

“Not much. It’s not my thing.”

She looks surprised. “Do you at least have Facebook?”

“Yeah, since middle school. And I probably haven’t looked at it in...three years.”

“Wow. Talk about a dinosaur.” She giggles.

“I’m a millennial. I’m not that old.”

“Really? Then why don’t you have a TikTok?”

I shake my head. “That shit looks too complicated.”

“Exactly my point.”

I laugh. “Whatever.”

We dig into our food. I wait to watch her take the first bite of the chicken stir fry with vegetables before I dig into my bowl. Everything from the vegetables, down to the cilantro, is mixed into that dish. Normally, I wouldn’t dress it this much, but I’m looking to impress.

“Oh, my god,” she moans, which makes my cock stretch against my zipper. “This is amazing. It’s almost better than sex.”

“Almost?” I raise a brow. How badly I want to prove her wrong.

Not yet.

She waves me off. “You know what I mean.”

I chuckle. “So I’ve outdone myself.”

“If you cooked every night, I wouldn’t be mad about it.”

The more she eats, the more she moans. And the more she moans, the more I struggle to hold onto my restraint. Especially when my imagination is running wild with thoughts of driving her moans to screams of ecstasy.

“I’ll take that as a five-star review, especially if you’ll react like that every time.” I wink her way.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“You’re disgusting.” But she’s smiling as she says it.

“Why? I think it’s adorable that you moan when you eat.”

“You think it’s adorable?” The surprised look on her face tells me she doesn’t know what to think.

“Yeah.”

“You like that I moan when I eat?” she asks again as though she doesn’t quite believe me.

“Sure. It lets me know I haven’t lost my touch in the kitchen.”

Her amused look falters before she rights it again and rolls her eyes. You’re good, but not Gordon Ramsay good.”

“You’re breaking my heart, Ms. Knight,” I tease

“All in a day’s work,” she says before taking another bite.

“One of these days, I will blow your mind with my cooking.” If there’s anything she should know about me, it’s that I never back down from a challenge.

If she’ll let me, I’ll blow her mind in other ways, too.

She looks surprised. “Wait, you’re serious about the cooking?”

“If it’ll make you happy, yes.”

She gapes. “I was just kidding. You don’t have to cook for me.”

“I insist.”

“Really? You want to do that?”

If that means more one-on-one time with her and putting a smile on her face?

“Absolutely”

She pauses, continuing to eat. “I didn’t think men liked to cook.”

I shrug. “Guess I’m the exception. I find it relaxing.”

“You’re the first guy I know who says that.”

“Just because not all of us do doesn’t mean we can’t.”

“Most straight guys I know wouldn’t touch so much as a spatula with a ten-foot pole.”

“Then they don’t understand what it means to cook for a woman.” I make direct eye contact with her.

There’s brief moment of silence as we stare at each other before she breaks both eye contact and silence. “I didn’t know you were so good at cooking.”

“I learned a lot through trial and error in my first year of college. During our sophomore year, when Jonathan and I first moved off campus, we found a house to rent. After settling in, I realized we didn’t have to live on microwave shit anymore, so

I decided to get creative.”

“Jonathan never mentioned any of this. What type of dishes did you guys make?” She seems intrigued.

“Of course he didn’t. Probably because I did the cooking while he either watched or taste tested. I made anything and everything. I grilled steak and baked chicken. I even made fettuccini.”

“Wow. If I’d known you such a good cook, I would’ve asked you for advice. The best I can make is eggs and toast.”

“So that’s what you lived on? That’s sounds miserable. “Please tell me there was more to your diet.”

“Once I got over the culture shock, yes. I made friends with locals, and they introduced me to many different cuisines. Curry was a personal favorite for a while. It’s popular in the UK.”

“You like curry?”

She nods. “I grew quite attached to chicken tikka masala.”

“I can’t say I’ve had curry before, but that sounds good.”

“It is, I swear. You should’ve—” She stops herself as though she were about to say something she shouldn’t. She stiffens for a moment, then concentrates on the food in front of her.

Things fall quiet between us again, as though a large crowd in Grand Central Station suddenly went silent.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

She takes another bite of her food, taking her time to chew and swallow before replying. “Yeah. Great.”

I lean forward. “What were you about to say?”

She shakes her head, still refusing to look at me. “It’s nothing important.”

“Even if it’s not important, I’d still like to hear about it.”

“It’s not a big deal. Seriously.”

No doubt the more I keep pressing, the further she’ll push herself away from me. As

much as I want her to tell me, she's clearly not budging. I'm not sure why. Could this be one of the reasons why Kami told me to tread carefully?

In the interest of harmony, I revert the conversation back to cooking. "Anyway, I find cooking satisfying. Therapeutic, even."

She seems to be grateful for my change in subject, because then she exhales, her body relaxing. "Wish I could say the same thing."

Fifteen minutes later, we finish our food and the last of our win. I clear our plates and send Mia to the living room. She settles on the couch.

Once I'm done, I grab the opened bottle of wine. "Care for another?"

"Should I? I'm not usually a wine drinker," she admits.

"Why not? It's the weekend. It's okay to imbibe more than usual." I pour more liquid into her empty glass. "I'll join you."

"Okay."

After filling both stems, I set the bottle back in the kitchen and sit beside her. Her feet are curled up beneath her.

"Thanks for cooking again."

"It's my pleasure. I'm glad you liked it." I smile faintly. "How was your day?"

"Good. A little stressful but good," she says before taking another long sip of her drink.

“How so?” I encourage her to drink more by taking another as well. She must be a lightweight because I notice her relaxing farther into the couch.

“There was more paperwork than expected. And it’s always hard when Jonathan isn’t in the office.”

“I know the feeling.” I’ve been humbled at how easy Jonathan and I have it when the work of one CEO is divided between the two of us.

“You must be under a lot of stress, too.”

“I am, but I’m managing. It could be worse.”

She shrugs. “That’s true.”

I take her hand in mine, testing the waters. “If you find yourself drowning, don’t hesitate to ask for help. My office is right next to yours.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

She takes another long sip of her drink, squeezing my hand. “That doesn’t seem like a bad idea.”

“Then it’s settled. But why don’t we just have a good time tonight?”

“Agreed. What should we do?”

There are a million things I’d rather be doing to her, specifically in my bed. But one step at a time. “How about a game?”

“What kind of game?”

What game can we play while she and I talk? A game that will get her more comfortable with opening up to me, especially if I ply her with more wine? Truth or dare? No. She’s too smart for that. No doubt she’ll choose dare just about every time.

And then an idea hits me. “I got it.”

“Do tell.”

“Have you played never have I ever?”

Mia finishes her second glass of wine with a frown. “Not since middle school.”

I shrug, more than happy to fill her wine glass once more. “Why not? It’s been years since we’ve seen each other. We should get to know each other again.”

She pauses. “When you put it like that, it makes sense. How should we start?”

Success!

In truth, I don’t care who goes first. No matter what, I intend to be fully honest. I’m just curious to see how she behaves. How she answers.

“Let’s flip a coin.” Digging into my pocket, I grab a quarter and pull it free. “Heads or tails?”

“Tails.”

I flip the coin, watching it land in my palm. “It’s tails.”

She takes another long sip. “Okay, I need to think.” She pauses. “Never have I ever...gone streaking.”

I chuckle before taking a sip from my glass.

She looks at me with total shock. “No! When?”

“It was part of our frat initiation in college. Not my choice.”

“That’s insane.”

“That’s college.” I think through the possible choices. Given that she’s started light, I probably should do the same. At least for now. “Never have I ever gone skinny dipping.”

She looks at me sheepishly before taking a sip of her wine. I can’t help but laugh. “When?”

“My sophomore year in college, on a dare.”

“What kind of dare?”

“The kind where I could win a hundred euros. Don’t recommend doing it in the dead of winter.”

“I would have loved to have seen that.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. Okay, moving on.” She pauses. “Never have I ever...slid into someone’s DMs.”

I take yet another sip.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

She looks at me, puzzled. “I thought you said you didn’t have social media.”

“I don’t. The one time I did, I gave her the benefit of the doubt. Turns out, the woman I wasn’t interested in wasn’t really a woman.”

“Oh, my god. You got catfished?”

“Yep, and never again. Okay, never have I ever used a fake ID.”

She shakes her head. “It’s legal to drink when you’re eighteen.”

“Lucky. In America, people can go to war at eighteen, but can’t drink until they’re twenty-one?”

“You’re preaching to the choir.” She cocks her head in thought. “Never have I ever...been called a player.”

This is one question I don’t hesitate to answer by gulping my drink. “If I had a nickel for every time someone called me that, I’d probably retire. So many woman I meet...that’s all they want.”

“Isn’t that a guy’s dream?”

“Why you’re young, dumb, and horny, sure. But eventually...doesn’t everyone want to be wanted for themselves?”

“And they don’t want you?”

“They just want to feel good in the moment. Once, that’s all I wanted, too.”

Mia won’t look at me. She seems uncomfortable. I laugh out of awkwardness. I must not be helping my case. Is that what she thinks of me? A player?

“I’m sorry. That just wasn’t an answer I expected.”

To do this right, I need to clear the air. “I admit I’ve slept with a lot of women, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want more than that out of life. There was a time where I thought I didn’t need love, and it didn’t need me. But things are different now.”

I need her to understand that.

She opens her mouth to say something, then stops herself. “I think it’s your turn, right?”

I nod. “Never have I ever been in love.”

I wait with bated breath. Will she take a sip? Won’t she? If she does, who was—or is—she in love with? Regardless of her answer, I still want to pursue her. I also want to know, once and for all, how she feels about Vance.

She raises her glass to her lips, then hesitates. “What if you don’t know?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

She shifts in her seat. “I don’t know what it feels like. Honestly? My love life has been complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“What did you mean when you said, ‘things are different now?’”

Answering a question with a question. Did I just hit a nerve? I’ll have to revisit that later. As for her question, what do I have to lose? “Not too long ago, I found a reason to commit.”

“You met someone?” She looks almost crestfallen but does her best to mask it.

“You could say that. For a long time, I was in a situation where I couldn’t pursue her. Now that some time has passed, things are different.”

“How long have you known her?”

“A while.”

“Was she married? Is that why you couldn’t pursue her?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“No. She was just...unavailable.”

“After all this time, what makes you think she won’t reject you?”

“She might. But deep down, I think she feels the same way. I just haven’t figured out a way to know if that’s true.”

“Why don’t you tell her how you feel?”

I could remind Mia the rules of the game, but I decide not to. Not when the conversation is getting where I want it to go. “It’s more complicated than that.”

She leans forward. “Wait, if you want to pursue this woman but haven’t been able to, why hold yourself back? Get it all out.”

“Admittedly, I’m afraid to hear her response.”

She leans back, sighing. “I know the feeling. I hate that my own emotions make me feel so helpless.”

“What would you do?”

She hesitates. “I’d like to say I’d just tell him how I feel, but I’m too chicken.”

“Do you like someone?” If she does, does she mean Vance? Or could she be thinking of me?

“Isn’t it my turn?” Again, she dodges my question. “Let’s just stick to the game, okay?”

I realize if I continue with my personal questions, she might shut down on me. And no amount of alcohol will change that.

Tread carefully. “Of course.”

“Never have I ever vomited after a roller-coaster ride?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t, but Jonathan has.”

“Seriously? My brother?”

“Oh, yeah. I tried to tell him not to mix nachos, a hot dog, and a soda with one of those spinning rides, but he did it anyway. Stubborn man.”

“Stubborn is the understatement of the century.” She giggles. “And serves him right.”

I smile. “Never have I ever had, or have, a favorite sibling.”

Without any hesitation, Mia takes a long sip of her drink.

“Mia Knight,” I chastise.

“Are you really that surprised?”

I shake my head. “No. Not really. Who is it?”

She looks at me incredulously. “I think you know.”

“Would I be right if I said Nathan?”

She pauses. “You said it, not me.”

“Is it because Jonathan constantly has his nose in your life?”

“Like a stick up my butt.”

I laugh. “Well, you wouldn’t be wrong.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

She tries to hold back a laugh, but fails. “Yeah. Pretty much.”

“Never have I ever regretted something.”

I take a sip of my now almost empty glass.

“What specifically?”

“A lot of things. Mainly losing opportunities I should have taken.”

Specifically with her.

But I’ve been busy making up for lost time. I just hope things work out the way I want them to. “What about you?”

“I’d have to say...liking somebody who didn’t like me back.”

“Why is that?”

She hesitates. “I found out the hard way my feelings were one-sided.”

“So he told you he didn’t like you? That’s harsh.”

She hesitates again. “Not directly.”

Not directly? “What do you mean?”

“I overheard him talking with his friends about me. It was...hard to hear.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you, Mia.” I sympathize.

She seems to be laughing to herself. “It’s funny.”

“What is?” I ask.

“The rest of the night I kept thinking, isn’t turning eighteen supposed to be fun and exciting?”

What stupid idiot broke her heart at eighteen, much less on her birthday? I wrack my brain about the possible perpetrators. It could be anyone, but I don’t remember her dating with anyone then. At least publicly. She didn’t date much as a teenager, now that I think back on the past. So who could she?—

Wait. Had she overheard him talking about her with his friends during her party? Could she be talking about me?

Holy shit.

“Mia.” I reach for her.

She shakes her head as though pushing a distant memory to the back of her mind. “It’s my turn again, right?”

“Mia.” I grab her hands in both of mine.

“W-what are you doing?” She’s obviously off guard.

Had I known sooner that she overheard me that night, I wouldn’t have waited this

many years to tell her what I'm about to say. "I said those things on your birthday, baby girl, but it wasn't for the reasons you think."

## Chapter Sixteen

I struggle to concentrate, but his voice is ringing in my ears. "What did you say?"

"You weren't supposed to hear that."

Yeah? Well, too late. I shouldn't be surprised he figured out who I was talking about. I all but told him. "Doesn't matter."

His jaw clenches. “Mia?—”

I try to tell myself to move on, but the memories of that night rush back. All the things I thought, wished, and felt swarms me as if I were reliving that night all over again. He has no idea how much his words hurt me. No idea how they’ve affected me since.

“Why were you and your friends even talking about me like that in the first place?”

“Jonathan and I had this friend who brought you up in our conversation. We didn’t know you were listening in. You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

“Who talks shit about someone at their own birthday party?”

He looks at me confused. “I wasn’t talking shit about you. I was expressing an opinion.”

“Yeah. A hurtful one.”

“What do you mean?” He looks so infuriatingly confused.

Why should I tell him the reason? He didn’t like me the way I liked him.

The way I maybe still do.

“What did you mean by ‘it wasn’t for the reason you think’?”

He pauses. “You deserve to hear the truth when you have a clear mind.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I hear what he’s saying. And he’s right. I appreciate his point. I deserve to hear the truth when I’m thinking clearly. But right now, I’m just pissed off.

“Why are you avoiding the question?”

“Why were you listening to the conversation in the first place?”

I sit there in silence. I have a chance to tell him the truth. It’s so close; it’s on the tip of my tongue. Then again, what’s the point? He didn’t see me as more than Jonathan’s sister—and he never will.

“Why are you mad about that night? I didn’t think I was being offensive,” he adds.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I would if you’d tell me.”

I’ve had enough of this crap. All we’re doing is running in conversational circles. “I don’t appreciate the personal questions. I’m going to bed.”

When I stand and start down the hall, he rushes to my side, grabbing my arm firmly and pulling me close. “Mia, did I say something to offend you?”

“Trust me, you’ve said plenty.” He’s pushed me beyond my comfort zone. On top of that, he’s reminded me of the reality of our relationship. “Thanks for dinner, and your little ‘game.’ I needed the reminder of where I stood with you.”

Where I still stand.

“What are you talking about?” Wow, he really has no clue. Of course he doesn’t. How could he have known a silly kid like me had such a huge crush on him?

The least I can do is tell him about it. “I had...a stupid teenage crush on you back then. And hearing you say you didn’t feel the same way hurt my feelings.” There. The truth is out. And the way he’s looking at me in shock makes me wish I could take it back.

“You had a crush on me?”

I nod, avoiding eye contact with him. “It was stupid and ridiculous. But don’t worry, I’m over it now.”

Of all the ways he could have reacted to my confession, I never expected him to start laughing. What the fuck? Now all I feel now is insecure. I’m desperate to run away and bury myself in a hole.

“Yeah, my adolescent feelings for you are pretty damn funny,” I say with sarcasm. “Go ahead, laugh for as long as you want.” Nice to know I was right about him not feeling the same for me—then or now.

Breaking free from his grasp, I walk hustle to my room and slam the door behind me. I don’t need any more humiliation than what I already feel.

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

I sit on my bed, contemplating whether to cry or not, when I hear a soft knock. “Mia? Mia, I’m sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you.”

“Really, because it seemed clear to me you were.”

“Please don’t shut me out. Let me explain. I’m sorry, baby girl. Let’s talk about this.”

“Fuck you,” I yell, throwing a pillow at the closed door. The fluffy down hits the door with a small thud before it falls to the floor.

“Mia.” His voice sobers as I try to bury my head in my other pillow, wishing I was somewhere else. “I wasn’t laughing at you.”

“Good night, Jake.” I turn onto my side, away from him. All I hear from the hall is silence, until the telltale squeaking of the hinges tells me he’s opening the door.

I whip around, ready to rip him a new one, only to find Jake standing over me. I don’t know whether to feel infuriated, intimidated, or turned on. “What is your problem?”

He says nothing. Silence hangs between us. All he’s doing is staring at me intently, wearing some expression I can’t quite figure out.

“Look, if you’re here just to laugh at me some more, you?—”

Before I know what’s happening, Jake tugs me off the bed and pulls me into his arms, cradles my face with one of his large hands, and melds his lips to mine.

Am I dreaming? Is this happening right now? Are his lips actually devouring mine? I should pull away, but all I want to do is melt in his embrace.

Like New Year's Eve, I'm caught by surprise. But this kiss feels different. It feels intentional, genuine, and definitely passionate. Heat creeps through me until my body burns all over.

I cling to him as if he were my only lifeline. Hell, he might as well be. The more I hold tight to him, the deeper he takes our kiss. Oh, god, is this what a kiss should be? If that's the case, I'm in for a roller-coaster.

Suddenly, the world around me is gone. All that's there to hold me together is Jake. I should be worried, but my logic seems to be out of commission.

No one has ever made me feel this way about a kiss.

He pushes his tongue in my mouth. I accept his invasion with zero hesitation. Oh, god, this feels so good. So right. I want more of him. I just can't get enough. Will I ever?

Wrapping my leg around his, I try to pull him impossibly closer. I want more. I need more. As though his body were the only way for me to survive.

He must be understanding what I need, because Jake pulls my leg up to his thigh. I feel something long and hard press close to my pussy, which I have no doubt has soaked my panties. I want him. I need him. Caution recedes. Shame doesn't exist. I'm dying for whatever is about to happen between us—now.

I start trying to peel off my shirt when Jake pulls from the kiss and gently lowers my arms to my sides. "Mia... No. Not tonight. You deserve something better. More intimate. When you're sober."

“I don’t want to wait.” I pout.

He grabs my face in both hands, giving me one last deep, passionate kiss. “But we should. And we will. You deserve a whole explanation. And I’ll give you one tomorrow. After that...well, we’ll see what happens.”

I understand what he’s saying, but my libido doesn’t give a fuck. All it knows is that I’ve waited years for him, and he won’t be in my bed tonight.

“Goodnight, Mia.” His sultry voice has me desperately clinging to his arm as he kisses my forehead and leaves my room, closing the door behind him.

He’s left me gasping, wanting, and aroused. Did that just really happen? Yes. And what the hell am I going to do about it?

## Chapter Seventeen

January 7

Mia

Jake kissed me again. What is this world I’ve now woken up to? I’m struggling to recognize it. The status quo has changed and I don’t know what to do.

I’m freaking out. I need to talk to someone about what I’m feeling, or I think I’m going to burst.

Need an emergency breakfast meeting. How soon can you meet me at our usual place?

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

I text Kami in a panic. I may be sober now, but I'm even more confused. Not just about last night, but about myself, too. I can't think straight. I don't know whether to feel excited, cautious, or afraid.

A few minutes later, I get a reply.

Meet me in half an hour?

Thank you!

Thirty minutes later, I tiptoe to the door, sneak out of the apartment, and rush into the restaurant to find Kami sitting at a table. Thankfully, the place doesn't look too crowded at half past nine.

"Thanks for coming so quickly." I hug her tightly. Her embrace is warm and inviting.

"Of course, girl. Seemed like an emergency."

"You have no idea." I sit across from her.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with Jake, would it?"

How did she guess? "Well..."

"Holy crap, it does. What happened? Tell me everything."

I spend the next few minutes filling her in, but I leave out the kiss. It's so

embarrassing that Jake pulled away.

Her jaw drops. “Wait. He did what?”

“I know. Isn’t that weird?”

“Actually, I was going to say that was smart.”

Is she for real? “How is playing never have I ever smart?”

“The game got you talking, right?”

Now that I think about it... “Yeah. We started out with small admissions. It was fun, really. And then the questions started getting...personal.”

“That explains a lot.”

“What?”

“Yesterday at work, Jake pumped me for information about you.”

I blink in shock. “You’re kidding. What kind of information?”

“The personal kind. The kind I thought wasn’t my business to tell.”

Why would he do that?

“You’re such a good friend.” I thank her, squeezing her hand in mine. “What did you tell him?”

“Nothing, really. But think about it... If he didn’t have feelings for you, he wouldn’t

asked me in the first place.”

“You think so?” I’m not convinced. Maybe he just wants to understand his roommate better.

“I know so. Anyway, his questions got too personal. Then what happened?”

“He started talking about seeing this woman, someone he was hypothetically willing to commit to. Someone who, until recently, he couldn’t pursue.”

Kami’s brows furrow. “Did he tell you her name?”

“No, and I didn’t want to ask.”

“So...then you told him that you overheard him on your eighteenth birthday?” Kami fills in the gaps.

“Not directly. At first, I said it was some guy. But he connected the dots once I said it happened during my party.”

“And then he started laughing?”

“Yep. He kept saying he wasn’t laughing for the reasons I was thinking.” But what other reason could he have? Just talking about it makes me want to cry all over again.

“Hey, come here.” Kami stands and approaches my side of the table to comfort me. A hot sting makes me realize tears are falling down my face. “I’m so sorry. If it’s any consolation, Jake isn’t the kind to laugh at you like that. He’s not usually mean.”

“Well, I must be the exception because he did,” I sniffle.

After giving me a tight squeeze, she loosens her grip to look into my eyes. “I know you’re going to hate me for saying this. But I want you to hear me out.”

I’m not sure I’m braced for this, but I called Kami to be the voice of reason. I need to listen. “Okay.”

“I have a theory, but you have to let me finish before you shoot me down.”

“All right,” I concede as we both sit.

“Think about it. He moves in with you, cooks you dinner, asks me about you, plays this game with you to ask personal questions. Why go to that much trouble just to be your friend?”

I’ve wondered that, too... Is everything Kami and Vance been telling me the reality I just can’t see? “I don’t know. After I walked away from the game, he followed me into my room. And he...kissed me.”

“Not a peck, I presume?”

“Not even close. Full lip-lock and tongue. The works.”

She squeals with excitement. “I knew it. Was it hot?”

“Smoldering,” I groan.

“Yeah? That’s awesome. Good for you, girl.”

“It was the most passionate kiss I’ve ever had. He held me so close.” Just talking about it makes me ache to feel his embrace again.

“Did anything happen afterward?”

“Like what?”

She stares at me like I should know what she means. “Did you guys do it?”

I wish. “He refused to do more than kiss me until I sobered up.”

“But he wanted more.”

“I think he did.” He was hard, after all.

“How do you feel about that?”

“I’m not sure. One minute he overwhelms me. Then seconds later, he does something that humiliates and embarrasses me. Then I blink, and he’s arousing me. A normal guy wouldn’t confuse me this much.”

“A normal guy...or a guy you don’t give a shit about? Maybe Jake makes you feel so many things so quickly because you care.”

“He’s an emotional roller-coaster.” But Kami might have a point.

“I don’t blame you for feeling that way. Things between you two are complicated. But I don’t think that’s his intention.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“What makes you think that?”

“A man doesn’t go to all this trouble just to give you mixed signals.”

“Then why did he stop at just kissing me? Why didn’t he take me to bed?”

“I think he’s trying to feel you out. He doesn’t want to scare you. And he’s also a gentleman. He didn’t want you to have any regrets after you sobered up.”

As much as I appreciate chivalry, I don’t know whether to feel rejected or cherished. He’s showing me a different side of himself than I’ve seen before. “Maybe.”

“When you think about being with Jake, what scares you?”

“A lot of things, mostly that he either sees me as Jonathan’s kid sister?—”

“Fair.”

“And, since we’re now roomies, a convenient notch on his bed post.”

“I understand that, given his history with women. But the man has jumped through a lot of hoops to get closer to you. If all he wanted was sex, I don’t think he would have tried this hard to get your attention.”

“Some players like the chase. They play the long game,” I point out.

“True, but manipulating women into bed doesn’t seem like Jake’s style. He’s a good

guy, and too good-looking to resort to mind games. Also, you're too important to him. Jonathan would rip him in two if he hurt you. Jake is a lot of things, but he's especially loyal and compassionate."

She's right. Jake isn't malicious or deceitful. I can't help but reflect on the night of Josie's birthday party, when he waited up for me. He cares deeply for the people in his life. Maybe...that includes me on some level.

"What other fears are in your head?" Kami fishes.

"Say he wants me as more than a friend, and we become a couple. What if his feelings are fleeting? What if, all along, everything in my heart is one-sided?"

"You're listening to your insecurities and anxieties. And most of the time, those aren't real. We have a choice to either believe them...or to take the leap of faith and look at things from the different angle."

For years, my feelings for him have seemed utterly unrequited. The idea that he could feel the same way seems almost beyond comprehension. Then again, life works in mysterious ways, right?

"Are you telling me to just...set my fears aside?"

"I'm telling you to hear what he has to say and give him the benefit of the doubt before you start believing the worst-case scenario. Who knows? He just might surprise you."

"How could he surprise me anymore than he already has?"

She shrugs. "I'm just saying, don't discount Jake. Where is he now?"

“I’m not entirely sure. I snuck out. But I didn’t see his car in the lot, so I’m betting he’s at the gym.”

“And I’m assuming you two will talk once he gets back.”

I shrug. “I guess.”

“Before you go back to your place, shoot him a text and tell him you two need to talk. Showing your initiative will send the message that you’re willing to hear what he has to say.”

“Okay.” But I’m apprehensive as hell.

“Everything will be fine. Things have a way of working themselves out. Just listen to him. And even if he says something you don’t want to hear, at least you’ll know. Okay?”

No, it’s not okay, but at this point I don’t see many other options.

Jake

The music in my ears is fast and loud. Beads of sweat fall down my brow. I look in the mirror, and I realize that no amount of weights I lift is going to get me to Mia sooner. Only I can do that.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

So much has happened in the last twelve hours. I'm still processing. Not only was dinner a huge success, but so was the game we played. I learned more about Mia than I anticipated. Knowing what I know now, I'm not surprised she never acted on her feelings for me. Because of a lie she was never supposed to hear, she was convinced I didn't see her as a woman.

How did I miss the fact she had a crush on me years ago? All those times, I merely watched her and kept my distance, I never knew my feelings were mutual.

Drunk or not, I should have told her.

No. Waiting was the right call. She deserves to hear the truth when she has a clear mind. When she and I can have a lucid, honest conversation.

Even though I told myself to wait, that didn't stop me from expressing my feelings for her in a more intimate way. I couldn't leave her that distraught without giving her some assurance that she isn't alone in her affections. That her desire isn't one-sided.

I don't regret kissing her. Every second was worth it. Having her lips under mine wasn't merely hot; I felt like I'd come home. Her soft body against my own had me itching to tangle in the sheets with her. No barriers. Just skin on skin, melding together in the heat of passion. She was begging for release, rubbing her no-doubt soaked entrance against my hard dick. All I wanted to do was carry her to the bed and claim her as mine.

Walking away from her nearly fucking killed me. But I had to. If I'd stayed, I would have done something I wouldn't necessarily regret, but Mia might have. She wasn't

in the right state of mind, and I want her full consent.

But now I need to get back to the apartment and tell her that my feelings for her developed when she was seventeen, and that I lied to keep the peace between her brother and me. I have to explain that everything I've done from the moment she came home from college was for her. Because I want her.

Before we clear the air, there's one more thing I need to stop putting off.

I've already gone behind Jonathan's back by moving in with Mia. I can't pursue her any further without explaining my intentions. The timing isn't optimal since I don't know when he'll be in range of a cell tower again, but I need this off my conscience, and I have to hope Jonathan won't make me choose between our friendship and my heart.

Grabbing my phone, I scroll through my contacts until I find his number.

This could either go really well...or really horribly.

Taking a deep breath, I tap on his contact and hold the phone to my ear. Through four rings, I'm hoping he'll actually pick up, but I get his voicemail. Leaving him a message isn't my first choice, but it will have to do.

As soon as I hear the beep, I start talking. "Hey, man. Hope you're having a good vacation with Kiera. When you get back, I need to talk to you about something important. Everything is fine with the business, so no worries there. There's just something personal I want to get off my chest. Enjoy the rest of your trip." I end the call and turn off my phone.

Relief and anxiety both flood me, like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I've said what I can to my best friend for now. I'll deliver the full truth face to face when

he gets home. So now all that's left is for me to tell Mia my truth.

What if she rejects me?

She's well within her right to do so. Going into this, I knew there'd be no guarantees, not after all the times I've lied to get close to her. If she wants me as much as I want her, like I want to believe she does, then things will work themselves out.

Confessing my feelings to Mia could go one of two ways: she could either feel the same way and want me to be a part of her life. Or she could tell me to get lost.

I could lose everything.

If telling the truth means I lose my best friend, my career, and possibly the love of my life, so be it. I just can't keep lying to everyone anymore—especially myself.

I grab my bag and exit the gym. The sky is the same color as this situation I'm in—gray.

As I'm settling into the driver seat of my car, my phone chimes. So soon? No, that can't be Jonathan. After the nebulous message I left, He'd be too anxious to text back a response. He would call and demand answers.

Reluctantly, I scan the device, but the text isn't from him. It's from Mia.

Headed back soon? We should talk.

Damn right.

We should. I'm on my way.

No more waiting. No more hiding. She's open to talking, and I'm all in. This is the next step. I just pray I don't stumble...

## Chapter Eighteen

Dallas, TX

Mia

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

Shortly after leaving Kami and heading home, I send Jake a text. I don't know what he'll think when he reads that I want to talk. But it's done.

His quick agreement is a surprise. I'm nervous but relieved. All I can do now is sit on the couch and wait.

Ten minutes later, I'm still waiting. I play a game or two on my phone, but nothing helps with my rising anxiety. Each second that passes feels like an eternity. What will he say? What does he want to tell me?

What happens after that?

Good question.

Depending on what we talk about and how well it goes, maybe I should be open and honest about some things, too. But if all he plans to do is laugh at me again, I'm not interested.

What if all his words end up being empty platitudes about what a good kid sister and friend I am? What if he's not willing to risk his friendship with my older brother and intends to set me down gently? Happily ever after is only in movies and books, right?

No matter what happens, I should prepare myself. A part of me would rather hide from the impending heartbreak. Hide from my feelings.

Before I can decide what to do, I hear a knock at my door. Is that Jake? No. He has keys. Maybe he lost them? Then how would he have gotten home?

Just in case my visitor is an axe murderer, I talk through the locked door. “Who is it?”

“Mia? It’s Vance.”

Of all the people who could’ve knocked on my door, he’s the last person I’d expected. Slowly, I open the door. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He smiles. “I’m sorry to just drop by. Trust me, I would have let you know I was coming if it wasn’t an emergency.”

Seeing Vance at my place is already unusual, but the fact that he’s carrying a suitcase is even more strange.

“Going somewhere?”

“I am...which is what I want to talk to you about.”

His timing sucks, but if it’s an emergency... “Come on in.”

“Thanks,” he wedges through the doorway and scans my unit. “You’ve got a nice place.”

“Thanks.” I lead him into the kitchen. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Got a bottle of water?”

“Sure.” I grab one from the fridge and guide Vance to the living room.

“How did you know where I live?”

“I called Josie. She’s out of town, but she gave me your address.”

“Where did she go?” I ask, handing him the bottle.

“Somewhere in the Midwest on a business trip.” He sets his bag down and accepts the water. “Thanks.”

“No problem. What can I do to help?”

“My grandfather has been sick for some time, and last night I got a call that he’s taken a turn. My family isn’t sure how much longer he’ll last. So I booked the first flight to Tucson I could get. I took an Uber here, but I wanted to talk to you before I left.”

“I’m so sorry about your grandfather. Were you planning to take another Uber to the airport?”

“Yeah.”

I shake my head. “Don’t waste your money. I’ll take you myself. We can talk on the way. What terminal are you leaving from?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I insist. You’re going through a lot, and you’ve helped me. Let me help you.” I grab my keys and purse, then put on my shoes.

Besides, I have no idea how long before Jake shows up. The airport isn’t far. I’ll be there and back before anyone misses me.

“Thank you. You’re the best.” Vance pulls me in for a hug.

“Anything you need.” I hug him back as he kisses my forehead.

Suddenly, a door slams. “Anything, huh?”

At the sound of the unexpected intrusion, I whirl to find Jake glaring at Vance, who still has his arms around me. I can only call his expression a snarl.

Oh, he’s pissed.

I pull away, wincing. I was so focused on my conversation with Vance that I didn’t realize Jake had come home.

“Hey, Jake.” I try to smooth things over. “You remember Vance, right?”

“Hey, man.” Vance extends his hand.

Jake refuses to take it.

Silence falls. It's tense and awkward. I don't know who Jake is more pissed off with, Vance or me.

What's his problem?

I clear my throat to break the ice. "I'm taking Vance to the airport."

"The airport?" Though he hides it well, I hear the bite of sarcasm in his tone.

"Yeah." Vance lets out an awkward laugh. "I told her she didn't have to, but she insisted. Isn't she so sweet?" He smiles at me, his gaze full of longing.

What is he doing?

"Can't you get an Uber?"

"I told her I would, but that's Mia." Vance squeezes my shoulders and tucks me against his body. "I stopped by to spend some time with my girl before I have to leave, and she volunteered."

I try not to grimace. Vance doesn't know that I don't need him to play the swooning boyfriend anymore. And Jake is reacting to Vance's act like someone waving a red cape over bull's face.

I have a feeling this is going to end badly.

Tearing his death glare from Vance, Jake focuses on me again. His expression shifts to one that's softer, almost sad. "Are you leaving, then?"

"I'll be back as soon as I drop him off." I try to grab Jake's hand in reassurance.

He pulls away. “Just go.”

In the snap of a finger, his demeanor turns icy.

My throat tightens and dries up. My heart races. I feel myself panicking. How do I fix this? What should I do? What did I do to deserve his cold shoulder? My first instinct is to cry. Yet my anger swells, swallowing up my sadness.

I’ll deal with him later.

For now, I turn to Vance, who grabs his things. “Let’s go.” As I open the door, I turn back to Jake. “We’ll talk when I get back.”

He doesn’t respond, just stares, shaking his head, as I walk out the door.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Wow, that was intense,” Vance says as I drive down the highway.

The tears in my eyes blur my vision. My grip on the steering wheel tightens. From the moment I drove out of view of the complex, I’ve been trying hard to hold onto my emotions.

From the corner of my eye, I see Vance look at me with worry. “You okay? You look like you want to murder somebody. Did I do something to offend you?”

I shake my head. “No. You did nothing wrong. It’s all me. I should never have let myself hope.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just when I was beginning to wonder if Jake felt the same way about me, he changes his mind.” I held back my feelings for years, never thinking he’d want to know. And now it’s too late. He’s moved on. I didn’t move fast enough.

“What are you talking about?”

“Isn’t it obvious? He treated me like I was dead to him.”

What did I do to make Jake that angry? It’s not like he cares about me that way. He even laughed last night. But just now, he almost acted...jealous.

Ugh. Forget it. I’m too frustrated and pissed off to figure it out now. His words and the disdain on his face... They’re stuck in my brain, playing on an infinite, torturous

loop.

No reason. No explanation. And once again, love has taken me in the wrong direction.

How am I supposed to fall in love if love itself keeps taking me down the wrong path? I was right when I went to college. Maybe I was better off staying in the UK. It would have been safer; I wouldn't have had my heart broken all over again.

And this time, it hurts so much more.

“If loving Jake means he can just change his mind about me like that”—I snap—“for whatever reason, at any time, I’m better off alone.” I wish I could turn off this pain inside me. Since I can’t, I’ll settle for hoping I never find myself in this situation—getting my heart broken—again.

“Mia, that’s not true. Jake is crazy about you.”

I gape at Vance. “You’re not blind. You saw what happened back there. And you still think he’s crazy for me?”

“He is.”

“He’s not. He made that pretty clear.”

Vance pauses. “Why do you think he gave you the cold shoulder?”

“I don’t know. Does he need a reason? Obviously he’s not interested in me anymore. That’s what happens every time a man thinks he wants to pursue me. The minute I get comfortable with them and start to open up, they leave. I should have known Jake was no exception.”

“Mia Knight, that is not true. In fact, hell, it’s the exact opposite.”

“You don’t understand.”

“You don’t.”

I scoff.

“I’m serious,” he continues. “Jake didn’t give you the cold shoulder because he wasn’t interested anymore. He did it because he was hurt.”

“How?” I question as I weave through traffic. Is Vance insinuating that Jake was, in fact, jealous?

My natural instinct is to go into repair mode. To figure out how to either fix the situation or fix myself so he’ll stay. But if Jake is going to bail over a misunderstanding—when he didn’t even ask what’s up between me and Vance—is trying to patch up everything between us even worth it? The man I’ve had a crush on for years doesn’t want me, period.

“He saw us together and jumped to conclusions.”

“If you knew that, then why did you antagonize him?”

“I wanted to see if he’d fight me for you, maybe confess his feelings. Clearly, I overestimated the situation.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Don’t blame yourself. I was wrong about him, too.”

“You weren’t. I may have laid the act on too thick, but I’m not wrong about his feelings for you. Given his reaction to us hugging, I think he might be dealing with fears and insecurities of his own. In fact, I’m willing to bet this isn’t his first time he’s felt rejected.”

“By me? Why would he feel rejected? How can you tell?”

“Takes one to know one.” He pauses. “He probably felt rejected because someone he cared about, more than likely someone he loved, chose someone else over him.”

Maybe that’s why Jake is the way he is.

Like me, he probably doesn’t want to get hurt again.

The conversation ceases when I pull up to Vance’s terminal. The Dallas-Fort Worth Airport is crowded today with families saying goodbye, with men and women dressed in business attire hustling inside.

“Do you need help with your luggage?” I offer.

“No worries. I got it.” He pulls his suitcase from my trunk, then pokes his head out through the open passenger-side. “Do me a favor while I’m gone?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t give up on him. And stop giving in to your fears and insecurities. Go home. Be with him. See what happens next.”

“What makes you think he’s still there?”

“Like I said, takes one to know one. I guarantee he’s still in the same spot, debating whether to pack up and leave or wait for you to come back. He’s wrestling with himself just as much as you are. Don’t give up on this chance, Mia. Or you will regret it for the rest of your life.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Dallas, TX

Jake

I’m leaving. This is bullshit, just waiting.

No, I should wait and see what she has to say.

But what if she isn’t coming back? She said she’d be back, and all her stuff is still in the apartment.

I need to get a grip.

She took her purse with her wallet, money, and her boyfriend. That’s all she’d need to start over.

No. I can’t think like that.

For half an hour, I wrestle with myself. Like the song goes, “Should I stay or should I

go?” That seems to be the current theme of my life.

How the fuck did I end up here again?

Earlier this morning, I was optimistic about the talk I was going to have with Mia. First, I planned to tell her the truth about my feelings, both then and now. And then I was going to work it out with a couple of I love yous. I guess this is what I deserve when I choose to pursue a woman for a night, rather than a lifetime commitment. Or maybe I was never meant for a lifelong relationship in the first place.

The last time I found myself here, the woman I thought I was going to marry, who I thought was the love of my life, left me.

No doubt Mia will do the same since history has decided to repeat itself.

I don't want to be cynical. I need to be practical. But this time is different. I feel off-balance. Shaky. Like I just got torn into two. I guess because I'm more emotionally invested with Mia, her decision to be with someone else cuts like a deep wound.

I'm going to sit here and wait. I want to know, once and for all, if I need to move on. I'm tired of playing what-if games with myself. One minute, I'm convinced I need to leave before I get any more hurt than I already am. The next? I sway myself back into hoping again.

Footsteps coming from the other side of the front door stop my train of thought. They're light, dainty. She's back. Shit, what do I do? What does this mean?

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

Standing from the couch, I watch her open the door. Our eyes lock on each other. Suddenly I feel like I've just walked into an arena, only I'm not fighting to win. I'm fighting not to lose her.

"Hi."

"Hi." She approaches slowly. "We should talk."

Earlier today, I would have agreed. Now I struggle to see a reason for it. "Do we?"

"I think it's important." Now that I see her face, her eyes look redder than normal. Has she been crying?

They could be tears of joy.

Then why does she look so defeated? As if she might start crying all over again. Not tears of joy, but sadness.

I look down and away. "Okay. What do you want to talk about?"

"Is something wrong, Jake? Between you and me?"

"No," I lie. "Nothing at all."

"You're giving me the cold-shoulder, and you won't look me in the eye. What would you call that then?" she snaps.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“No. Where do you think I should be?”

With me, but I guess that idea is moot. “I wouldn’t have kissed you if I’d known you were going to choose him anyway.”

“Choose him? All I did was drop him off at the airport.”

Says her. “Of course you’d choose him; he’s your boyfriend. It just would have been nice if you told me who you wanted to be with before all of this.” I point between us.

“Jake, listen to me. Vance had a family emergency, and needed a ride to the airport. I couldn’t just tell him to fuck off.”

“Don’t lie to me anymore,” I yell.

“I’m not.” Tears stream down her face.

“I have feelings for you. I’ve had them for a long time.”

She pauses. “You weren’t BSing me?”

“Of course not. And I thought you had them, too. Guess I was wrong.” I start to walk away. “I’ll move my stuff out by tomorrow.”

I never intended to walk away. I didn’t plan on parting ways like this. But now, what’s the point of staying if the one you love would rather be with someone else? I’m crushed that she’d choose him over me. I’m angry that she let me believe that we had a chance. Why didn’t she say anything before? Why wasn’t she honest with me about how she felt? Am I the person every woman fucks before they find the love of

their life? And I thought Mia was different, that I could be her one-and-only.

I'm almost to my room when a gentle hand brushes mine. So soft and warm. Mia's touch is too tempting to resist.

"Don't go," she speaks softly.

I can't look at her. I'm afraid if I do, I'll break down.

She walks around to face me. Her expression is soft with either compassion or pity. I'd rather not have either. I'm not a charity case. But I can't help myself. I lean into her touch as she holds my face with both hands. Her body is so close to mine. My heart races. Despite my protesting brain and my breaking heart, my dick salutes her.

Before I know what's happening, she leans forward and touches her lips to mine with a tender kiss. Why? I should pull away. Nothing I could do now will change her mind.

But she is my weakness.

That's the one thing I can't deny about her. I find myself enraptured. Why do I keep torturing myself with this hope?

## Page 55

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

With a sigh of defeat, I wrap my arms around her, holding her tight against me. If this is goodbye, then I'll make this the best goodbye sex she's ever had.

### Chapter Twenty

Dallas, TX

Mia

The touch of Jake's lips on mine is intoxicating. I can't get enough. All I want is him. And I want him now.

I know where this could lead. There's no doubt he's thinking the same thing. Thinking this is a bad idea. But with the way he's kissing me back and the way he's holding me close, I don't think either of us care. This feels right. Maybe, after all this time, we need this connection.

I've dated other men before. Been with them intimately. But none of those moments with those other men compare to what's happening right now.

At this point, I've come to the realization my crush on Jake never ended. I used to be afraid of him seeing all of me, the real me. Not anymore. I'm done hiding from him. If this is my one chance to show him how I feel, I'm taking it.

He pulls me closer to him, one strong arm wraps around my waist while the other brushes over my butt. I cling to him, wrapping a leg around his. His cock is hard against my inner thigh. I moan as he breaks our kiss. He glides his lips down my jaw,

my neck, my collarbone, before stopping at the swell of my breast.

All that arguing, his teasing, his flirting. Was that to get my attention? To tell me he wants me as much as I've wanted him? If that's true, I'm now kicking myself for not giving in sooner. For not setting aside my fears and insecurities long enough to see him as the man I've desired for all these years, not the man I couldn't have.

I lift my shirt over my head and let it fall to the ground. I grab him again and crash my lips to his. His muscled chest feels hard against mine.

"Mia," he breathes between kisses. "Are you sure?"

I pull him back into my kiss. No talking. No more arguing. No regrets. I'm done fighting what feels natural.

I want him. I crave him.

"I need you."

I barely get the words out when he grabs hold of my legs. "Jump."

I do as he says. He lifts me, pinning me against the wall. My sex rests on his cock, only the material of our jeans separating us.

"Fuck," he moans.

I wrap my legs around his hips, bringing him closer and scratching my nails down his back. His breath hitches between kisses.

I accept his kiss deepening kiss. His taste is something out of this world. The heat that burned the last time he kissed me now has grown into a wildfire. I need him to put

out the flames quickly building inside me. No other man that can do that

I try to wriggle against him. Anything for that orgasm. But he holds me tight, keeping me from finding friction. Dammit.

A frustrated moan escapes my lips.

“You do that, baby girl, and we’ll be fucking in the hallway.”

“So?” I don’t know what’s come over me. At this point, as long as I have him, I don’t care where we do it.

“You deserve better.”

“Then take me to the bedroom already.”

“All in good time. I intend to take my time with you.”

“But I want?—”

He shushes me with his warm lips on the sweet spot of my neck. “You’ll have it when you’re ready, baby girl.”

“Your place or mine?” I say, kissing up and down his neck. I’m desperate for him to give me what I want.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

He chuckles. He must be realizing what I'm doing because then he slips a hand down my jeans and covers my clit.

I gasp and moan all at once from the contact. I melt into him.

"That's my girl."

I lean my head against the wall as he pleasures me with these small, slow, agonizing circles. Every time I get close to going over the edge, he pulls me back from the precipice.

"Please," I beg him. What the hell has he done to me?

He smirks. "The more you struggle, the longer you'll have to wait."

I don't know if this is pleasure or torture. I hate it, but I'm loving it. Whatever the case, my fantasies of this moment are nothing compared to the real thing.

I groan. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Maybe a little bit. But I can tell you are, too. You're so wet." He pushes one finger inside me while his thumb continues to circle my bundle of nerves.

"Oh, god. Oh, god. I'm right there." I immediately regret saying those words, because he ceases and pulls his hand free.

"Hey—"

He ends my protest with a kiss. I lean into it and feel him shifting, walking. And then I'm free-falling. I gasp until my back hits the mattress and I find myself looking at the ceiling of his bedroom.

"That's my baby girl," he praises.

I bite my lip. I think I've just realized I have a new kink. The more I'm with this man, the more I learn about myself. How does he do this? How does he drive me crazy yet soothe me all at once?

"Spread your legs," he demands.

I must have found some kind of confidence I didn't know I had. Or maybe I'm just that desperate. I say two words I'd never thought I'd say to a man, much less to Jake. Two words I know will add fuel to the fire we're making. "Yes, Sir."

In that moment, his hazel eyes blaze black. I don't know whether to be terrified of what happens next or as turned on as I feel.

He climbs over me before devouring my lips in another kiss, this one thorough and scorching.

With my legs spread, I wrap them tightly around him, drowning in the sensations of his lips raking my neck.

I feel his hands underneath me, then my bra gives way. I watch him throw it across the room. My breasts are now on full display for him.

I try to cover them with my arms, but he pulls them apart, pinning them to my sides.

"You have gorgeous breasts, Mia. Never be ashamed of them." He cups one in his

hand before leaning in and sucking my nipple in his mouth. He gives the other the same treatment, pinching the first with his thumb and forefinger. The sweet sensation of pleasure and pain has me arching into his touch.

I grab at his shirt, riding it up his torso. I want his bare skin on mine.

He releases his hold on my nipples, kissing my lips again. “Not yet, baby girl. I want to look at every inch of you first.”

I shiver at his words. I feel something inside me drop to my core. I squirm from my newfound arousal. The thought of a man studying my naked body is a fantasy I’ve always had but never had the courage to try.

I move my hands to the button of my pants when Jake stops me, pinning my arms above my head. “Allow me.”

I nod, staying as perfectly still. My heart pounds so loud, I wonder if he can hear it, too.

He kisses down my jaw, licks each my nipples in turn, then drops down to my stomach, exploring my skin with sweet presses of his lips.

I watch him slowly unbutton my pants, slide them down my thighs, and yank them completely free. I’m left in nothing but my drenched pink underwear.

“All for me,” he growls before ripping the delicate scrap from my body and throwing the scraps to the floor with the rest of my clothes.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

I'm now bare and open to him. I have nowhere to hide.

He scans every inch of my body. "I've seen you in sweats, business attire, and even a bikini. But now my favorite outfit of yours is your birthday suit. And soon, it'll also be me on—and inside—you."

I gasp at his statement. "Jake..."

"Do you want me to stop?"

No. God, no. This feels too good.

"Love me," I whisper.

He leans forward, grabbing my cheeks, and kisses me once more before he caresses his way down my neck, over my breasts and peaked nipples, down my torso, and around my thighs. Finally, he grips my hips and stares at my slick folds. An instant later, he presses two meaty fingers into my pussy, stretching me beyond what I thought I could handle as his finger curl inside me. His thumb circles my clit, and our gazes fuse.

"Are you ready for me, baby girl?"

"Yes, yes, yes," I keep repeating as he draws me closer and closer to climax. "Please."

He tugs his shirt over his body, throwing it out of sight. He tackles his pants next,

shoving them off, along with his underwear. His thick, long cock springs free. Veins pop from the shaft. His crest already seeping.

I gasp in surprise at first. But then the thought of licking him his most sensitive spots has me biting my lip.

He studies me. “You like what you see?”

I try to hide my blush, but it’s useless. I’ve never been with anyone this big before.

He holds my chin in his hand, pulling my focus to his eyes. “I like it when you blush for me.”

Just his words alone have me feeling so good, and he isn’t even inside me yet. Regardless of his feelings for me, I’m dying to know how good it will be between us. The pleasure he will no doubt give. The bliss that’s awaiting me.

I sit up from the bed, reaching for him. “Can I touch it?”

I want to feel him in my palm. Taste him in my mouth. Make him feel just as good as he’s making me. If he’s going to unravel me, I want to take him down with me, too.

For a second, he looks surprised, but he smiles. “All in good time. But first”—he pulls me to the edge of the bed before shoving my legs wide apart and bending close to my pussy—“I want to lick up all the cream you have for me.”

Before I can respond, he separates my slick folds, and he curls his tongue around my bundle of nerves.

My last thought? Jake Hall is absolutely going to undo me, and I’m going to love every second.

Jake

I'll never get tired of this, of her pleasure in my hands. Her sweet submission has my cock hard as stone. I'm dying to get inside this woman, but I want to enjoy this moment with her for as long as I can. Because once reality hits, it will hit hard. And questions will have to be answered.

Why is she letting me do this? She has a boyfriend.

Maybe I can show her I'm better. Maybe this moment will change her mind and show her I'm better for her. Or does she plan on crawling back to her boyfriend come morning? No. I don't want to believe that. This time with her feels more intimate than just a good fuck.

Logic tells me I should walk away before I get hurt. Yet my gut says to stay. I've wanted this woman for so long. If this is my only chance to get her to see that, then I'll give her everything I have.

She writhes underneath my tongue. Her moans turn into louder whimpers. She grabs onto my scalp, driving me deeper. She's close to finishing. Good. I want to taste more of her juices.

I then switch tactics, slipping my tongue into her slit. If my fingers tell me anything, it's that I'll have to take my time as I work my way inside her.

I tighten my grip around both her thighs as I explore her pussy even more, bringing her closer. She arches her back.

"Jake. Jake. I...oh, god. Oh, god." She lets out a scream that's like music to my ears.

I take in every last bit of her cream. Damn, I could spend my life making her feel as

good as she does right now. The sounds she makes when I pleasure her, both big and small, are now my favorite music. Her naked body is my favorite sight to see.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

I slowly come back up from her pussy, traveling up her body, past her gorgeous breasts to her flushed face.

Her eyes are barely open as we gaze at each other.

For years, I questioned if I could ever be happy with someone else. A part of me wished someone would come into my life and have me forget about Mia. Forget the fact I burned for her. Anything to end my torment. End the battle I'd had with myself between wanting her, and being ashamed for it. But right here, and right now, is all I need. She is what I need. That has never changed. And it never will.

I kiss her mouth once again as I settle between her legs.

“How do you feel?” I speak softly.

She breathes deeply. “I feel...wow.”

“That’s my girl.” God, what a beautiful sight.

She grabs my chin, bringing me back to her mouth. “I want more,” she whispers between kisses.

“You’ll have more. I promise you that,” I assure her as I reach a hand downward to align my crest at her entrance.

“How long has it been?”

“A-a couple of months.”

Seriously? That long? If it's been that long since her and Vance had sex, he's clearly not getting the job done. More brownie points for me since I'm going to rock her world, if I haven't already.

Besides that, I know I'll have to take my time moving inside her. No doubt she's tight. Fortunately, the time I've spent revving her up should make things easier.

“This might hurt a bit, so let me know if I need to stop,” I tell her.

She nods in response.

I then slowly start penetrating her entrance. Immediately, I can feel her sex tightening around me. I let out a groan. It's both pleasure and pain. I need her to relax.

I use one hand to make slow circles against her clit as I continue to slowly drive deeper inside her.

“Oh,” she moans. “Oh, my god. What do you do to me?” She caresses her soft hand onto my cheek, the other on my hip.

I feel a bead of sweat fall down my brow. If I didn't have to worry about hurting her, I'd just thrust in to the hilt at one time. How tempting that is. But the last thing I want to do is hurt her. Not when my goal is to give her pleasure.

A few seconds go by, and my length is halfway in. I stop, letting her adjust. “Are you alright, baby girl?”

She nods, her breathing heavy as well.

“No pain?”

“No,” she whispers. “Jake, I need you.”

Did I hear that right?

Was that a slip of the tongue, or did she actually mean that? I want to believe she did, but it could’ve easily been a heat of the moment. There’s needing someone as in being in someone’s life, and then there’s needing someone during sex. The question is, which one could she mean? But right now, I’m choosing not to think about that. I want my head to be here in the moment. I’d rather think about what will happen afterward tomorrow.

“Please,” she pleads to me again as she wraps her legs around my hips. “I want more of you.”

More of me is what she’ll get...soon.

I grab hold of both her hands, pinning them over her head. “You’re not in control right now, baby girl. I am.”

Keeping her hands pinned with one hand, I use the other to tease her clit again. She lets out a gasp, followed by a loud moan. She wriggles underneath me. She’s close. Her sex clamps onto me like a too-tight pressure cuff. If I don’t move now, I could finish before I even start.

Immediately, I pull my hand away from her button and push the rest of my cock in her sweet pussy. We both groan.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Baby, you feel so good.” I capture her lips.

Being around her is one thing, but being inside her is something out of a fantasy.

Slowly moving my hips back, pulling back halfway, I then thrust back in hard to the hilt. She lets out a sound that’s something between a gasp and a moan. We moan together as I find a hard, steady rhythm. I can hear skin slapping with each thrust inside her. I make sure our friction hits her clit.

“Harder,” she demands.

I grab her legs with both hands and place them over my shoulders. I feel myself moving impossibly deeper inside her. Her moans become more cries of pleasure. With each stroke, I know I’m hitting her sweet spot. One thrust after the other, I know I’m coming close to crashing. But I don’t want to come down from this cloud of ecstasy with her.

She grabs a tight hold of the sheets in both hands. Her back slightly arches. “Oh, god. Jake. I need you.”

I drop her legs, towering my body over hers as I continue driving hard and deep. I try to contain my orgasm as long as I can.

“Jake. I’m going to...”

“Come with me baby. Come.”

“Oh, god, Jake!” She screams out her orgasm.

I’m right behind her. “I love you.” I let out a feral growl, pouring myself inside her.

Crashing down from that high with her, for a second, our bodies become one. I release more of my seed inside her. I want this orgasm of ours to last a lifetime, if it could.

Reluctantly, I pull myself away laying beside her. I’m not ready to leave her yet. Not ready for this to be over. And I never will be.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Sunday, January 8

Dallas, TX

Jake

The morning sunlight seeps into my room, waking me up. For a second, I think it’s like any other day. Then I notice someone in my arms.

Mia

I look down at her sleeping form. So peaceful, beautiful, the way her body curls next to mine.

Last night might as well have been the best night of my existence. Every kiss, touch, and caress was out of this world. Burying myself inside her over and over again was like heaven. She is my heaven. And I never want to give that up. All this time I’ve spent apart from her, and that’s what I was missing?

As mind blown about our connection as I feel right now, there are still a lot of unanswered questions before I even think about putting a ring on her finger. What's going to happen now? Who will she choose? What does the sex mean to her? Are we an item, or was she just trying me on for size before her boyfriend gets back? It isn't him that I give a fuck about. I give a shit about Mia. I always have.

From what I can remember about her past relationships, she was always in until one of them called it quits. She's loyal and committed to making things work. But that was when she was a teen. Is she still that same person? Given the fact we've slept together and she has a boyfriend, maybe not. But what if Kami is right? What if Vance and her aren't that serious? Jeez, wouldn't I love for that to be the truth? What happens now can either go well or end very badly.

But I have to come clean to her too.

I've lied and manipulated her to get what I want. I don't feel guilty about that. What I feel guilty about is not claiming my territory in the first place. I know now I love this woman, and I refuse to let her go. I intend to spend every waking moment telling her that.

What about Jonathan?

That's my only issue now. Telling Jonathan how I feel about his younger sister is one thing. To tell him that I've been slowly seducing her since the moment he left for vacation would have him flip his shit.

One problem at a time, though.

I take a deep but quiet sigh. That's right. I still have more time to think things through. He comes home in a few days. Hopefully by the time he's off the plane and in Dallas again, I'll know what to do. No matter what I say, it won't be good news

from his perspective. All I can do is just come out and say... I'm in love with her and have been in love with her.

I vault out of bed, donning my sweatpants. What better way to make her feel loved and cherished than breakfast in bed?

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

I sneak out of the bedroom. Before I leave the room, I look over at her once again. The urge to slide back into bed and do all the unholy things we did last night is all too tempting. But sex can't do all the talking for me. Sex can't tell her what I need to say. Sex would only delay the inevitable conversation that needs to happen if I want any future with her.

She has to know I want more than sex.

I walk into the kitchen to see my phone right where I left it. The device continues to charge on the island. To let Mia keep sleeping, I silence my phone.

After that, I gather eggs and bacon and manage to find some pancake mix. I've just gotten out a pan and placed it on the stove when I hear a vibrating noise.

I look over my now-glowing phone.

Who could be calling me on a Sunday?

I grab my cell to look at the collar ID.

Jonathan?

Of all the calls I could've received, why is he calling? Is something wrong? Did something happen? Or did he just now listen to my voicemail? Jeez, if that's it, looks like I'll have to get my story straight sooner than I thought.

Grabbing my phone, I walk out the front door so Mia can't hear. After about the third

ring, and I shut the door behind me and accept the call.

“He lives,” I joke.

I hear a chuckle on the other end. “Hey, man. How are you doing?”

“Good. Just got up, actually.”

“Really? What time is it there?”

“Almost eight.”

“That’s right. I keep forgetting there’s a time change on my end.”

Whatever he’s calling about, I don’t think it’s just to chitchat. “To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?”

“Well...” He laughs awkwardly. “A couple of things. I got your voicemail, and I’m all ears.”

“I don’t really want to talk about this over the phone.” Something doesn’t feel right about not telling him to his face.

“Totally get it. We can talk when Kiera and I get back.”

“Oh yeah, what time is your flight then?”

“Actually, we’ve just landed at Love Field.”

I freeze. What does he mean he just landed at Love Field? Please tell me that’s an expression for sex on the beach or something. “Don’t tell me you cut your vacation

short because of my voicemail.”

“It wasn’t just that. It’s Kiera. She isn’t doing well.”

“Kiera?” In the background, I can hear someone vomiting.

“Oh, god, I feel like shit.” I hear an exhausted feminine voice in the background.

“You’re doing a great job, babe. Just close the paper bag and keep breathing,” I hear Jonathan comforts her.

“When did she get sick? What happened?”

“Kiera seems to have caught a bug a few days ago and has been vomiting off and on ever since.”

“Shit, that’s sounds horrible. Anything I can do to help?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“That’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. I would have called sooner, but it was late and we didn’t want to wake you. We decided to come home early, and the earliest flight we could get was close to midnight. Could you come pick us up at the airport? Our plane just arrived at the tarmac.”

“Sure thing, man. What gate are you coming into?”

After exchanging information with Jonathan, I quickly shove all the food back where I found it. I then walk quietly back into my room. Mia is still right where I left her, fast asleep. Her bare shoulder is visible. Her hands scrunch up the comforter close to her face. Her hair cascades across the pillow.

My reality has come early. Earlier than I wanted. There’s still so much I have to make her see, make her hear. Will all of what I’ve done be for nothing in a matter of just one confession? I wish today wasn’t the day I could lose my job, my best friend, and the love of my life all at once. Maybe then I could be a bit more secure in the knowledge that Mia loves me despite what Jonathan thinks. But I don’t know that yet. I don’t know what’s going on in that gorgeous head of hers. For now, I burn this image of her in my bed—naked, asleep, and satisfied—to memory.

Forcing myself to walk away, I grab a T-shirt from the laundry room and put on my shoes next to the front door.

Before I leave, I grab a notepad and pen to write a short note. When I’m done, I rip the piece of paper from the notepad, grab a piece of tape, and tape my note on the inside of my door. I might not be here when she wakes up, but she’ll know I was thinking of her and intend on coming back.

Twenty minutes later, I pull into a parking spot at the airport. The airport is as empty as if it were deserted as I make my way down to their gate. I only have to wait a few minutes before I recognize Jonathan and his sickly pale bride-to-be. Wow, when he said she wasn't feeling well he wasn't kidding.

"Welcome home, guys," I greet them.

"Hey, man." Jonathan and I briefly hug, patting each other's backs.

"How's the invalid?" I take my focus back to Kiera. I'd hug her, but I don't think that would be wise.

"I feel like shit." Kiera's face turns slightly green. "Where's the closest bathroom?"

"You need to vomit again, sweetheart?" Jonathan drops the luggage in his hands, turning his focus to Kiera.

She takes deep breaths. "I think I'll be fine. Just get me home."

I interject. "Down the hall and it should be to your right just past the chapel."

I barely finish the sentence before she starts running in that direction by herself.

"I hope she makes it," I say to Jonathan as we both watch her sprint down the corridor.

"Me, too," he replies, grabbing the luggage again. "Has any luggage come out of the baggage claim yet?"

I shake my head. "Not that I've seen."

We both sit down at some chairs nearby. I notice how tan Jonathan is. “Spent a lot of time in the sun?”

“More than I was expecting in all honesty.”

“So you...shook some sheets?” I wink at my best friend.

He laughs. “A gentleman doesn’t tell.

And that is why I respect him. “But seriously. You guys had a good time?”

“It was nice. I admit going on vacation, or at least spending more time away from work, is something she and I should do more often.”

“I’m glad she suggested it.”

He shakes his head. “Oh, no. I knew that idea had you written all over it.”

I scoff, trying to hide that truth. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No need to hide it. Kiera told me you two were talking about it.”

Of course she’d tell him. No surprise there since they seem to tell each other everything.

“How’s everything been on your end?” Jonathan asks.

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Well, you’d be happy to know KH Industries didn’t burn down while you were gone. No issues in terms of projects. It was more work than I’m used to but not too bad.”

“Good. Good.” He clears his throat. “Like we talked about, I listened to your voicemail. Everything okay? It seemed pretty urgent.”

I sigh. “It’s something...I should have told you a long time ago.”

Jonathan leans back, seemingly cautious. “Did you get a woman pregnant or something?”

“No, nothing like that. Though, it is about a woman.”

“Are you thinking about settling down?” Jonathan leans forward again. “Who is she?”

“She’s...someone you know, and who we’ve known for a long time.”

“Why all the suspense, Hall?”

I want to tell myself it’s for him, but I’m starting to think it’s more for me. Somewhere deep down I think if I can delay this news, he can at least feel normal for just a bit longer. But I know that doesn’t help anything either.

“Because I’m not sure how you’ll react.” Who am I kidding? I know damn well how he’ll react. “I’m in love with Mia. And I’ve been in love with her for a while. I’ve

wanted to tell you for years, but I wasn't sure how to say it. Especially when you were so adamant that no one in our friend group should pursue her."

There is—what feels like—a long silence between us. Should I brace for the angry expression, murderous eyes, and punch in the face, gut, and balls? I might as well.

Eventually, he slowly nods as though processing this information.

I continue. "Until she got back from college, until she was an adult, I'd kept my distance. And the last thing I want is for this to ruin our friendship?"

Jonathan interrupts. "I knew."

He what? "Y-you knew?"

He nods. "I've known for years. And I knew well before she left for college. It wasn't hard to notice your glances at each other." He chuckles. "I didn't like it at first, but as time went on, I saw how you still protected her even when you couldn't have her. I respect and thank you for that."

Is this an illusion, or is this all real? "Why didn't you say something?"

He shrugs. "Honestly? I was waiting for you to tell me. I knew you'd be scared shitless, like you are now, and waited for you to make a move. I didn't want to out you like that, man."

"So you're okay with me pursuing her?"

"More than okay." He smiles. "Those rules I made then were for a teenager so she wouldn't find herself heartbroken and in trouble. But those days are long over. If you want her, go get her. You're my best friend. If I could trust anyone to take care of her,

it's you. I know you'll treat her the way she deserves to be treated."

I pause. I know now those rules were null and void a long time ago. "Do you think I have a shot?"

"Saying you have just 'a shot' would be an understatement. You've been her crush for a long time. She's never said anything, but that doesn't mean I don't have eyes."

All this time, I've been wondering what this conversation would be like. Who knew all I had to do was say something. I'd only thought about the worst possible scenario, rightfully so, only to find out he knew and was okay with it since she became an adult.

"Then do I have your blessing to ask her to marry me?" I tease.

Although, the thought of Mia in a white dress and bouquet of flowers in her hands while making her way to me gets me excited. And then the thought of her barefoot and pregnant with my babies comes to mind. Putting those two thoughts together has me hard as hell.

But I can't get ahead of myself. There's still one more part of the equation I have to take care of.

"Baby steps, man. Make your relationship with my sister official first. Then we'll talk about a blessing."

I laugh. "Will do. Thanks, brother."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Mia

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

I'm half-awake when I turn on my other side and brush my hand over Jake's side of the bed, thinking I'd touch hard muscle. Instead, my hand is met with soft, cool, sheets. He isn't here beside me. He hasn't been for a while.

I slowly open my eyes. A part of me wants to fall back asleep. To still think he's here. As though what we shared mattered to him just as much as it did to me.

I close my eyes, only to be met with the memories of his mouth on every part of me. The pleasure he'd given is something I don't think I'll ever forget. His hands cupping my breasts as he sucked and teased my nipples. His talented tongue caressing my clit and sending me over the edge so many times. His deep, powerful thrusts were like nothing I've ever experienced before. Just the thought of last night has me thinking I could go over the edge and into oblivion once again. The familiar ache from my girl parts comes back to life. I don't think I could ever get enough of him. He was a taste of forbidden fruit while I was his goddess.

We didn't use protection.

With the memories of such pleasure come reminders of reality. Crap, I forgot to grab a condom. Good thing my period ended yesterday.

I gave myself over to a man who was only temporary. He's living with me because he has to, not because he wants to. A heated moment and nothing more.

Sex with Jake was nice while it lasted, and now it's time to move on.

Slowly moving out of bed, I search all around the floor for some semblance of my

clothes. How difficult can it be to find my underwear, let alone the rest of my clothes? A bra here, pants there, and who the hell knows where my panties went?

After long minutes of searching, I manage to find and don yesterday's clothes.

I'm about to walk out of the room, when I see a piece of paper taped to the door. There's writing on it.

Morning, baby girl.

I'm sorry I couldn't be here to see you wake up. Jonathan called and asked me to pick him and Kiera up from the airport. I'll explain everything when I get back.

I'll be home soon,

Jake

The more I reread the note, the more my heart swells. The more memories come to the surface. He said he loved me. Maybe last night wasn't just about sex.

Wait. Why is Jonathan at the airport?

They're not supposed to be home yet. If Jonathan is coming home early, what does that mean about his and Jake's "arrangement"? Does this mean Jake won't be living with me anymore? I should be happy to soon be a free woman earlier than expected. But why do I feel overwhelming dread?

I quickly walk down the hall and into my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. I can't borrow trouble. At least not yet. Not until I've talked to Jake.

After I shower, wash my face, and brush my teeth, I begin to feel more awake. Once

I'm fully dressed into a clean, blue pajama top and sweats, I walk into the empty kitchen.

He said he'd come back.

I continue to self-soothe. God, I need to get a grip. I'm a strong independent woman, not a desperate damsel. But all I can think about is what happens now. Was this a fling and nothing more? The thought makes me sick to my stomach.

My first instinct is to run away. Run and hide. Bury myself under a figurative rock. But at the same time, my feelings for him are something just as powerful. Something that I know will never go away, even if I choose to run.

I need to gather the facts before I decide on a plan of action. Figure out where his head is. Once I know, I can prepare myself from there.

I grab my mug from the cabinet and watch absentmindedly as it fills with French vanilla coffee. After the pink mug is filled I dress it with cream and sugar. I then rest on the couch, scrolling through my phone. For now, I can keep my mind off the possible and terrible scenarios of how today might go.

A few minutes of sipping coffee and scrolling through video after video on my phone goes by when I hear the door unlock and open. I quickly turn my head, anticipating seeing his face. We lock eyes on each other.

What do I do?

I sit there frozen in place as I try to find my voice. "M-morning."

"Morning," he speaks softly before clearing his throat and speaking more clearly. "Did you see my note?"

I nod. “I did. Why were they at the airport?”

“Kiera got sick a little while back, so they decided to cut the vacation short.” I realize he’s holding a box of donuts as he walks into kitchen and places them on the counter.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Is she okay?”

“Now that she’s home, I’m sure she’s happy to be in her own bed.”

“If I were her, I’d probably feel the same way.” I follow him into the kitchen. “You got food.”

“I figured we could have some eggs and bacon with the donuts.”

If he got breakfast, maybe last night did somewhat matter to him. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to,” he replies, walks over to me, and caresses my cheek.

I lean into his warm touch. “Can I help?”

“No need. But you can set the table if you’d like.”

I smile before grabbing plates, place mats, napkins, and silverware. Arranging the table only takes a few seconds before I’m left just staring at him as he cooks the eggs and bacon on the stove.

“I didn’t know we had a donut place nearby.” I lean against the island as I watch him multitask between the two pans.

“I thought the same thing until I noticed one on my way back.”

“Good to know.” I give my best fake smile. Now that he’s here, my questions become loud in my head.

I dread having to ask him. Will this be like ripping a bandage off, hurting for only a moment? Or will it be like getting hit by a truck?

“Can I make you coffee?” I dart to the coffee maker on the other side of the kitchen. Anything to stop my mind from scaring me.

“Yeah, thanks,” he replies.

I let out a silent sigh of relief. “How do you drink it?”

“Black.” He flips over the pieces of bacon.

A few minutes later, our plates are filled with food and we sit at the table.

“This looks delicious,” I compliment him.

“Only the best for you, baby girl.”

A shiver of pleasure runs down my spine hearing him say my nickname. How can a man make me feel scared, horny, and desirable all at once?

I grab my fork, digging into the scrambled eggs that are seasoned well with salt, pepper, and a hint of what looks like salsa.

I moan from just the first bite. “How did you?—”

“I’ve found that adding a splash or two of medium salsa to eggs gives them a bit of a kick.”

“Without the flavor being too overwhelming, right?”

“Exactly.” He winks at me.

We eat the rest of our food in silence. The longer it lasts, the harder it is for me to ignore. Even the sweet taste of my favorite donuts I so adore can’t make me feel better. The silence is uncomfortable.

I’m pulled from my thoughts when Jake’s voice breaks the silence. “Are you finished?”

I nod before he sets my utensils and napkin on the plate and puts the dishes in the sink.

There’s nowhere to hide anymore. I have to talk to him. This is it.

## Page 65

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

I take a deep breath. “Now that my brother is back, what happens?”

He turns to face me. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t have to be my brother’s keeper anymore. So what happens between us now?”

He pauses as though in thought. “That depends on what you want.”

“How does it depend on what I want?” What else is there to question? “This was my brother’s plan from start to finish. This should be self-explanatory.”

He hesitates. “Under normal circumstances, yes. But there’s more to it.”

“What are you talking about?”

After cleaning off the dishes and setting them in the dishwasher, Jake sits down next to me again. He takes my hand in his. “I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

I stay silent, as though waiting for a bomb to go off.

“I’m in love with you. And I have been for a long time.”

So when he said he loved me midorgasm, he meant it?

I gasp. “Y-you have?”

“Yes. That’s why I say it’s up to you. I don’t intend on leaving unless you tell me you don’t feel the same.”

I’m about to say something, but Jake continues. “Before you say anything though, I need to come clean with you about something else.”

I squeeze my hand. I study his anxiety-filled expression. He must be scared about how I’ll react. “I understand.”

He sighs deeply. “On New Year’s, I said Jonathan told me to move into your apartment to keep an eye on you. That was a lie. I just said that to convince you it was his idea and not mine.”

Is he saying what I think he’s saying? “You mean...my brother never told you to move in?”

“He was never involved.”

“So... So...” I can’t find my words. Not only did he move in with me for god-knows-what reason, he also lied to me about my brother’s involvement. “But why?”

“Why did you think I kissed you on New Year’s?”

His words make me put two and two together. He’s in love with me and he moved in with me because...he’s in love with me.

“You did all of this...for me?”

“And I’d do it all over again if it meant I’ve won your heart.” He pulls his hand away from mine. Immediately, I miss his touch. I start to open my mouth in reply when he hands me my phone. “If you don’t believe me, call your brother. He’ll confirm

everything I'm telling you."

If he's been lying to both me and Jonathan, wouldn't me calling my brother risk his friendship with him? "What about my brother? If I told him, you could lose everything."

"Call him," he assures me.

Opening my phone, I scroll through my contacts until I find my brother's number.

I look back up at Jake for confirmation. He can't be serious. Does he know what he stands to lose? My brother will want to feed him his balls when I tell him this.

He gives me a firm nod.

Okay, his funeral.

I click on his number and lift the phone to my ear. It rings once...twice... Then it stops before the third.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Hey, Mia.”

“Jon. I just heard you’re back home.”

“Yeah, Kiera hasn’t been doing very well.”

“I heard that, too. Bed rest and saltine crackers should take the edge off.”

“Good to know. How have things been?”

“They’ve been good. Nothing crazy.” I pause. “Listen, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“Sure thing.”

“Before you left for vacation, did you tell Jake to do something for you?”

“Other than take care of everything with KH, not particularly no. Why?”

“So you didn’t tell him to move into my apartment to keep an eye on me.”

“Why on earth would I do that?”

I stare at Jake with wide eyes. He only responds with another nod.

“Is-is he living with you? Did he tell you I told him to do that?” I can hear his anger and confusion.

“Until now. You’re sure this wasn’t your idea?”

“Mia, I know in the past I’ve been a bit overprotective, but I’d never tell my best friend to do something like that for me.”

“So he hasn’t told you anything?”

“He told me he was in love with you when he picked us up at the airport this morning, but that was it.” Jonathan sounds bewildered. “W-what the hell has been going on since I’ve been gone?”

Despite Jonathan’s panic, I find myself distracted by Jake’s eyes locked onto me. And I can’t seem to stop myself from doing the same.

I turn my attention to Jonathan’s voice on the phone. “I’ll call you back later.”

My mind flashes back to weeks prior: Jonathan’s sudden decision to go on vacation and my New Year’s kiss with Jake. Everything that’s happened since the holidays now all makes sense.

I hang up the phone with zero hesitation.

“If you don’t want me,” Jake says. “if your heart is with someone else, I’ll understand.”

“Someone else?” I speak softly. I don’t know whether to feel shocked, deceived, or flattered. My emotions are all over the place.

“Your boyfriend, Vance.”

I’ve just now entered a whole other level of mind blown. Crap, I forgot about Vance.

About the fact I told Jake we were seeing each other when that was a complete lie.

Whether out of realization of the irony, or something else entirely, I start laughing.

He awkwardly laughs with me. “What are we laughing about?”

He must think I’ve gone crazy. I take a deep breath before I respond. “I’m sorry. I should have told you earlier.”

“Told me what?”

“Vance was never my boyfriend. I just said that to make you jealous.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“You were trying to make me jealous?” He starts laughing again.

“After you met Vance at the club, he became convinced you were into me. I disagreed with him. So to prove his theory, he posed as my boyfriend to see how you’d react.” I shake my head in disbelief. “He’ll be happy to know he was right.”

He chuckles. “Baby girl, you didn’t have to make me jealous. I’ve been crazy about you for a long time.”

He pulls me into his lap. He wraps his arms around my waist as I do the same around his neck.

“You have?”

“Yes. Since you were seventeen.”

I freeze. For that long? That would mean he wanted me as much as I wanted him all those years ago. How could I not have known?

Because I didn’t believe it to be possible.

I blush. “I was crazy about you then, too.” I pause. “If you wanted me then, why did you say I was just a kid sister to you at my birthday party?”

He sighs deeply. “Your brother, at the time, had made it very clear to our friend group you weren’t to be pursued. You were young. And it was known that some of our friends would’ve been more than happy to take liberties with you once you

became a legal adult. I knew that if I made them think you weren't significant, they'd leave you alone. I never meant to hurt you."

"You were protecting me?"

He nods. "When you came home from college, things changed. You were an adult. I didn't see a point in pretending anymore. And seeing you for the first time in years made me want you all to myself even more."

"Even when I was gone? Even when you surrounded yourself with other women?"  
How can I know they were there for nothing more than filling an empty hole?

"They never mattered to me. Every time I was with someone else, I'd imagine you. My heart has always belonged to you."

And I foolishly pushed him away.

Since the minute I came home from school, all I've done is avoided him, pretended he didn't exist, and wished I didn't feel what I was feeling when I was with him. I tried everything to destroy the pedestal I'd made for him in my heart. I thought I'd made my peace with the past, knowing he didn't feel the same as I did. But in reality, I now know I was lying to myself. Even when we were oceans apart, I found myself wishing he were the London boys that I was with. I don't want to do any of that anymore. I don't want to pretend I could be happy with someone else. And I don't want to pretend I don't love him when really I do.

I shift myself to straddle him. His dick is hard against me as I deeply kiss his mouth.  
"You don't have to imagine anymore."

Chapter Twenty-Three

I press my body against his. I can't seem to get close enough, even when his hands are on my back, squeezing me closer. My arms are over his shoulders while my hands are in his hair.

I feel him press his hard erection against my entrance. I slightly wince from the soreness, but I don't care. I need him with, in, and on me—now.

He pulls away from our kiss. "You're hurt."

"Not hurt. Just sore," I assure him.

"You sure you're ready for more?"

"Make love to me." I don't need to think to know what I want. There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

He looks surprised at first, but then that surprised expression morphs into something like newfound determination. So much so, that he grabs hold of my backside with both hands and rises from his seat.

He slowly begins to walk down the hallway. "I know it's late to ask this, but are you on the Pill?"

"I'm not." Is this a dealbreaker for him? "But my period ended yesterday. Should we use a condom anyway?"

"No. I want nothing to be between us."

He does? "But what if I get pregnant?"

His expression remains neutral. "And?"

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

His statement catches me by surprise. “You want me pregnant?”

“I want to marry you as well, but the order doesn’t really matter to me.”

I laugh. “Don’t I get a say in this?” I’ve always wanted kids. And the thought I’ll be having them with the love of my life makes me eager to get started.

“Of course,” he smiles his charming smile. “How many kids do you think we should have?”

I let out a giggle. “Let’s start with one and see where that takes us.”

I kiss him again, taking in his scent before he lays me across his bed. He’s all over me. He’s everywhere.

Just fifteen minutes ago, I was prepared to walk away. Prepared for the other shoe to drop. The dread had been building up inside me since I woke up alone in his bed. But things have turned out in a way I didn’t expect. And now that I’m here with him again, knowing he’s not going anywhere, I can enjoy him freely. Enjoy the love I know now he has only for me. Always have and always will.

Was I truly that blind?

At first, I wasn’t. I was going off on the information I was told and what I’d seen. Back when I was eighteen, I let myself walk away when I could’ve stayed if I had one good reason. But I didn’t. At least as far as I knew. What would have happened if I’d chosen to stay home for college regardless of what he’d said that night? Would

we have gotten together even then? The feelings were there, so all we would've had to do was reach out to each other.

That would've, could've, should've crap has zero hold on me now.

I have him and he has me. The point of thinking of what could've been is moot.

His hands on my body as he peels off my clothes takes me away from my thoughts. He then pulls down my pants. The cool air on my girl parts feels freeing.

He stops, looking up at me. "You're not wearing underwear." He tsks. "How naughty of you, baby girl."

I don't know if I'm horny or have found some moxie I had buried deep inside me, maybe both, but I decide to say eight words I know he'll get back at me for later. "And what are you going to do about it?"

Within seconds, he pins my arms above me. "What was that? You want me to withhold your orgasms?"

The hell he would...right? "You wouldn't."

"Oh, baby, I most certainly would. And I'd enjoy your little pleas for that release."

How can I be shocked, appalled, and even more turned-on for his suggestion all at once?

"But for now, I want to feel you come on my fingers, tongue, and dick all day and all night long."

I settle deeper onto his erection. "And all night?"

“You heard me, baby girl. Now that you’re mine, I want to make up for lost time.”

“Oh.” His lips find that sweet spot on my neck. He knows full-well what that does to me.

“You know...” He stops kissing me as he leans his head to mine. “I’ve got an idea of how we can do both.”

I sigh into his embrace. “Go on.”

He moves off me. I feel naked without his embrace. Wait, I am naked. Right.

I watch him rushing out of the room. I put my weight on my elbows. “Where are you going?” I yell.

“Getting supplies.”

Supplies? Does he plan to have me swinging in midair or something? “What kind of supplies?”

A few seconds of silence goes by until he returns with a Tupperware of strawberries, a cannister of whipped cream, and chocolate sauce.

Immediately, I know what he has in mind. “Are you?—”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Yes. Now lie back and hold still.”

I reluctantly do as he says, lying flat on the mattress. But that doesn't stop me from questioning his motives.

He sets his “supplies” down beside me.

I watch him strip down to his birthday suit before climbing back on top of me. I immediately spread my legs.

“I want you.”

“Tonight”—he grabs the whipped cream, spraying the contents on my neck. I flinch from the sudden coldness—“I'm going to make a meal out of you.”

He continues adding whipped cream on my nipples, down to my naval, and to my clit.

He then grabs a strawberry. “Care for a strawberry, baby girl?”

“Yes,” I reply without another thought.

Putting the cut top in his mouth, he leans down to my lips. And with my teeth I grab hold of the strawberry. The flavor of the strawberry, mixed in with the taste of his mouth, is a whole different flavor I never expected. The sweetness of the strawberry mixes in with the passion of his kiss.

I reach for him, to get him closer, but he pulls away again. “What are you?—”

He then grabs the chocolate syrup, holding it up with a satisfied grin.

“Where are you going to put that?”

“Where do I have the whipped cream?”

I start to close my legs. “You can’t be?—”

He keeps my legs apart with his hips. “Yes I am, so stay still. I promise, you’ll enjoy this as much as I will.”

I’m not a fan at not knowing what’s going on in that dirty mind of his, yet at the same time I’m finding it incredibly sexy.

Opening the cap on the bottle, he tips it over, letting it drip on my skin from my clavicle, down my body, and close to my pussy. He spreads it on my body like I were ice cream.

I’m so shocked by this, I forget I still have a piece of strawberry in my mouth. I chew the last of it before swallowing.

He kisses my neck, hitting my sweet spot that immediately makes me moan.

“Jake.”

“Yes, baby girl?”

“I need you inside me.”

“And you’ll have me. As soon as I have a taste of you.”

If it wasn’t for his lips and talented tongue on my body, I’d be pissed that I’d have to wait.

I close my eyes from the growing pleasure. He travels lower, down to my breasts. My nipples are covered in whipped cream and chocolate syrup.

Within seconds, he devours one of them. Sucking it. Teasing it in a circular motion with his tongue. I arch my back, wanting him impossibly closer.

He moans. “Oh, baby, you taste so good.”

“How good?” I breathe out the question. My eyes are closed.

“You’re now my favorite dessert.” He moves to the other nipple.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

This is our second time in bed together, yet he makes it feel like the first. What are the odds every time with him will be like that?

Until Jake, sex was never been as exciting as this. Sure, a guy could get close to getting me off, but at the end of the day, it was always anticlimactic and ended too early. But this is far beyond where my imagination has taken me. What Jake is doing to me, to my body, puts my fantasies to shame.

I never thought a man could enjoy me like Jake has. Never thought he'd want to make our moments like this one about me and my pleasure.

The circular motion around my nipple pulls at a feeling down to my clit. He continues to lick downward to my stomach. He licks all over, as though making sure every corner of my body is touched in some way. The closer he gets to the bundle of nerves where I need him most, the more I feel my heart race.

He's so close.

Finally, after what feels like a pleasurable eternity, he's in direct eye contact with my pussy. Why is he just staring?

I try to peek down there when he drags me closer to him by the legs. He kisses down my left inner thigh, sending a shiver up my spine.

"Oh," I moan, leaning my head back as I feel his kiss drawing closer to my clit.

"You like that, baby girl?"

Before I can respond, his mouth is on me. I gasp at the sudden contact. He's relentless as he sucks on my clit. His tongue is hitting all the right spots yet has me just hanging over the edge. I'm not quite at orgasm, but one stronger stroke could undo me.

I breathe heavily as he explores more of me. His tongue invades all over, fast and aggressive. Every now and then he comes back to my, no doubt now, swollen clit.

I grab at his scalp. "Jake. Please, oh, god. Oh, my god."

I try to gyrate my hips to meet his mouth, inducing my own orgasm, but it's no use. Especially when he uses a free hand to firmly pin my lower body to the bed.

I'm helpless.

I have no choice but to enjoy this terrible pleasure. Crap, I think I underestimated his hold over me. Especially in the bedroom.

He pulls his mouth from my pussy, coming back to meet my gaze.

He then kisses my mouth. "Are you a good girl?"

"Yes," I plead. "Yes." I'm almost over the edge and unable to reach it.

He takes a hand to my clit, moving in terribly slow, circular motions. "If you're a good girl, you will come for me only when I tell you to. Do you understand?"

I'm so distracted by this agonizing pleasure, I'm barely able to respond. "Y-yes."

"Yes what, baby girl?"

The audacity of this man. He clearly is having way too much fun with this. “Yes, sir.” I’m barely able to breathe out the words.

“Good.” He lets go of my pussy, taking my climax with him. He then aligns himself at my entrance and thrusts inside me all at once. I let out something between a gasp and a scream.

“Fuck,” he groans, leaning his head back. “Baby girl, you feel so good when you tighten around me like that.”

“Oh, Jake,” I moan.

“That’s right,” he assures as he grabs my legs, putting them in the crook of his arms. His thrusts become deeper and faster. “Say my name, baby girl.”

I hold on to the sheets, trying desperately to follow his rules for me. But his fast pace, and contact with my clit with each thrust, has me about the step over the cliff.

“Jake, I’m...please...”

“Soon, baby. Soon,” he breathes out. He seems to be holding himself from orgasm too with his flushed face and beads of sweat on his brow.

The harder he thrusts, the harder it is to think. He’s hitting that spot inside me each time he comes back into me.

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Jake, I’m about to...” I’m so close to orgasm, I probably shouldn’t have said anything.

Without warning, he changes positions, dropping my legs back onto the bed. He uses his hands to support himself on top of me. His thrusts become slower but harder. Each hard thrust has my moans slowly turn into screams. I’m so close to orgasm.

“No, beautiful. Not until I say so.” He caresses my cheek, capturing my mouth to his. His body on, and in, mine feels as though we’re one.

Each second, it becomes harder to do as he says. Especially when he lowers a thumb to my clit. The building pressure inside me is now too strong to control. I relish in the release like a well-deserved reward.

“Jake,” I scream within seconds, letting go.

He lets out a feral groan not even a second later, giving one last hard thrust into me. “Fuck. Mia.”

A couple of seconds go by as we ride each other through our orgasm, making the pleasure last longer.

Finally, he relaxes his body, resting his head on my chest. His cock is still inside me. “I love you, Mia.”

“I love you, too.” I kiss his head.

He worships me all day and night. And every time we reach oblivion together, he tells me he loves me.

After a while, we decide to experiment. And by noon the next day, there isn't a surface in the apartment we haven't had sex on. Every time I think I'm exhausted, he helps me find a newfound energy to go again.

By four, we're in the shower together. His mouth is on my clit as he helps me ride out my one of now-countless orgasms.

I barely have time to catch my breath when he scoops me into his arms, pins me against the tile, and impales my swollen pussy with his cock.

I let out a loud gasp in pleasure, and move my hips with his. At this point, I'm molded just for him.

He lifts me up and down into one hard and fast thrust after the next. I audibly pant into our next blissful climax together. We stare into each other's eyes. His piercing gaze is for me and only me. He doesn't have to use words to tell me I belong to him.

"I don't think I could ever get enough of you," I tell him as I find my voice again.

I don't know if there's a better way to describe how much more of this man I want. I could lick, tease, and make love with him for eternity, and it still wouldn't be enough.

"I'll never have enough of you. You're mine, Mia."

"And I'm yours," I whisper in his ear as we reach the edge and fall over the edge together again.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Monday, January 9

Jonathan and Kiera's home

Mia

After ringing the doorbell, I silently wait. My lilac blouse, black business jacket, and pants protect me from the cold early evening breeze.

Shortly after Jake and I arrived at the office this morning, we quickly found out Jonathan and Kiera would be out for a couple of days.

I decide to visit my brother's home for two reasons. The first is to see how Kiera is doing. That's the reason I give Jonathan when asking to visit him. The second, and one I'm still trying to find the words to, is about me being with Jake. The man I love. His best friend and business partner.

Now that I know things between their relationship are going to be okay, I feel more at ease with talking to my brother about Jake and me. For years, I believed Jon to be the reason Jake and I would never be together. But I understand now I was wrong. Calling him only to hang up on him, the previous day must have left him a bit confused. I came to his house to not just give clarity to him, but also to find some for myself.

A few minutes later, I hear the door unlatch and watch it open. Jonathan stands in front of me.

"Hey, baby sister." He hugs me. "Come on in."

With his gesture, I walk through the threshold, smiling. The house, despite being somewhat cluttered with bags of laundry, is still as spectacular as ever with its grand staircase and elegant aesthetic.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Thanks, Jon. How’s your fiancée?” I ask.

“Some days are better than others. Sleeping in our own bed helps, though.

“I get that.” A thought pops into my head about her sudden illness. “Is there any chance she’s pregnant?”

His eyes go wide as though this was a thought that hadn’t occurred to him. His expression of surprise then shifts into a neutral expression as he clears his throat. “No comment.”

I could pry him with more questions, but I’d rather not go any deeper into my brother’s sex life than I already have.

“Okay.” I change the subject. “Anyway, um, there was something else I wanted to talk with you about.”

“Is this about you and Jake?”

I hesitate. “Why don’t we sit down?”

He nods, following me into the spacious living room with big windows overlooking the large backyard.

“I’m all ears.” He smiles.

I sigh. “I know how you said you were okay with Jake pursuing me.”

“Yes,” he responds. “And I still am. Why? Did he already fuck up or something?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “No, no. Everything is fine. Really good, actually.”

“Good to hear he’s making you happy.”

“So you did know. That we liked each other.”

“It wasn’t lost on me that Jake never went into a committed relationship. I knew because he would never commit to another woman.”

“If you knew how we felt about each other, why didn’t you say anything?”

“You’d just turned eighteen. You needed to find yourself. Spread your wings.”

“You could have prevented me from going. You had so much authority over me.”

“I didn’t want you to think you couldn’t decide anything for yourself. I wanted you to come to your own conclusions about Jake.”

I shake my head. “Now I wish I’d made different choices.”

He rests his hands on mine. “We all feel that way about some moments in our lives. The important thing is you two now have each other.”

He’s right; we do have each other. Jake came back to me, and I came back to him. No matter what happened in the past, I think we were meant to be together.

“I’ve already told Jake this, but if there’s anyone I trust to take care of, love, and cherish you, it’s him. I’ve always known he’d treat you the way you deserved to be treated.”

Happy tears begin to well in my eyes. “Why didn’t you try to intervene when I got back from school?”

He whips away one of my fallen tears with his thumb. “Like I said, I wanted you to come to your own conclusions. I was also waiting for Jake to make a move.”

“If you were for us being together, why did you get upset with Jake on New Year’s?”

“As your older brother, I had to find some way to bring you two close. When the opportunity presented itself, I ran with it.”

I laugh. “You sure had me fooled.”

“Does that mean I get an Oscar?” he teases.

## Page 73

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

Jonathan has showed himself in such a light I've never seen before. A different side of himself that's the exact opposite of how I've always known him to be. Why didn't I see it before?

"Sure." I roll my eyes, I sniffle when more tears stream down my face.

He takes his hand in mine. "I do want to apologize to you about how I went about protecting you. At the time, I saw it as keeping you safe. But I understand now that was an invasion of your privacy."

I wrap him in a tight hug. "I love you, Jonathan."

"I love you too, little sister."

Epilogue

Three months later

Dallas, TX

Jake

"Baby girl, we're going to be late." I try to get the Mia to finish putting on her makeup.

"Patience is a virtue, my love," She lectures.

I playfully roll my eyes. “There goes that word again.”

“What? Patience?”

“You know that’s not in my vocabulary.”

“That’s for damn sure since you had to have me after I just took a shower.”

“It’s your fault for being so goddamn beautiful.”

Life with Mia is nothing short of perfect. She’s the first thing I see when I wake up in the morning, and the last thing I see when I fall asleep. I fight with myself whether to ask her to marry me now or in a month when we’re at a location in Maui overlooking the sea. I’ve had my proposal planned for months, and the closer that day approaches, the harder it is for me to keep it to myself. Of course, all that planning wouldn’t have been possible to do alone.

Kami and Kiera would murder me if I ruined the surprise.

Kiera’s wrath, even when she’s twenty weeks pregnant, is terrifying. Pregnant women are no joke.

Mia and I are still trying, but no luck so far. Whichever comes first, the ring or a baby, doesn’t matter to us.

“Okay.” I hear the clicking of Mia’s shoes before she appears in front of me. “I’m ready.”

“Good. Let me look at you.”

Mia comes into view wearing her favorite shade of purple. A lavender floor-length

dress that accentuates all her curves. My favorite ones especially.

“You know, I think I should help you get out of that dress and not go anywhere tonight.” I wrap an arm around her waist, holding her close against me.

She gives me an incredulous look. “You’d like that now, wouldn’t you?”

“You know my favorite outfit on you is nothing at all.”

“Later,” she whispers in my ear. The sooner I get her home from the rehearsal dinner, the better.

A few minutes later, we arrive at Ian’s bar, the Brick. I open the passenger-side door for Mia, taking her hand in mine and helping her out of my truck.

She’s all but running in her tall heels. “Hurry.”

“Baby girl, don’t run. You could fall and hurt yourself.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:20 am*

She looks over at me with a hand at the door. “I’ve been in heels since high school. I’m not going to fall.”

“Whatever you say.” I’ve quickly realized that sometimes it’s best not to argue with female logic.

We walk into the crowded bar. Tables and chairs are occupied by a combination of Kiera and Jonathan’s friends and family.

“Mia, Jake,” Kami calls out to us.

“Hey, girl.” Mia and I walk to our designated seats. Mia is beside Kami, while I’m beside Jonathan.

An couple hours, food, a lot of booze, and some hilarious speeches later, we’re enjoying a late night of celebration. Mia and I are on the dance floor, dancing to a song sung by a woman about loving the fact someone calls herseñorita. I move my hips with hers.

“Do you have any idea how much I want you right now?” I growl in her ear.

“I could take a wild guess,” she teases.

Hell, yes. “All this wedding stuff, and you in this dress, has me hard as hell for you.”

She smiles a coy smile before kissing my lips.

She rests her head on my chest. I notice Nathan in the corner—talking up a petite blonde wearing a bright blue pantsuit and heels. Whatever charm he’s trying to put on, she’s clearly not buying it.

Huh. That’s interesting.

“What’s the deal with your brother?” I ask Mia.

She turns her gaze to her brother. “Nathan? I’m not sure.”

“Who’s he talking to?”

“I think that’s the wedding planner.”

I’m curious to know more, but the stopping of the music, followed by a tapping of glass, grabs my focus away from the interesting pair.

“Everyone, can I have your attention, please?” Jonathan calls everyone to attention with the DJ’s microphone in hand. “Thank you.”

He then passes the microphone to his bride-to-be. “Thank you to everyone who came tonight and who will be at the ceremony. We are so grateful for you to be in our lives, especially now. With that said, we have an announcement we’d like to share.”

Perhaps my best friend couldn’t keep control of his excitement because then he grabs the microphone from her hand. “It’s a boy.”

I hear gasps throughout the bar, followed by claps and words of congratulations. I look over toward the soon-to-be newlyweds at a smiling Mia.

Caressing Mia’s face, I guide her to my gaze. She leans her head against my touch before slowly meeting my eyes.

“I love you,” I tell her.

“I love you, too.”

I don't know what the future holds for us. But I sure know we will be together along the way.

See Nathan Knight conquer love when he takes on a feisty female who challenges his bachelor status - and his heart.