



The Interview

Author: *Jocelynn Drake*

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Description: My boss played cupid ... And set me up on the best date of my life.

My boss meddled.

The app matched us.

And Arden curled my toes with his disarming smile, sweet humor, and bone-melting kisses.

Go on a Valentine's Day blind date and fall in love with Kaylan and Arden.

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KAYLAN

My boss was a madman.

Insane.

Lunatic.

Meddling old woman.

Okay, so maybe he technically wasn't any of those things, but right now, it felt like it.

But buying a phone so he could download that ridiculous H2H dating app and enter me into the "Cupid Picks You a Date" Valentine's Day madness without my knowledge was over the top.

I pulled my wool winter coat tighter around me as the wind picked up, whooshing across the top of Mount Adams. The sky was a dreary slate gray, but what did you expect from Cincinnati in February? From October through March, the area rarely ever saw the sun. The sparkling city became a depressing place of cloudy skies, bare brown trees, and dark-gray buildings.

Whatever. This was already going down as one of the weirdest days since I'd started working as an assistant to Sebastian Courtland, CEO of Courtland Enterprises. Actually, I was more of an assistant to his primary assistant, but I had regular

dealings with Sebastian. That had led to the nosy manfinding out that I was single and had zero plans for Valentine's Day. Apparently, Sebastian thought I was too young to be sitting home alone on this most hallowed day.

As I climbed the stairs to the Cincinnati Art Museum within Eden Park, I scanned the area for any sign of the person who was supposed to be my date. The picture included in my meet-up instructions had been of an attractive man with blondish-brown hair, blue eyes, and a killer smile.

Fake.

No way a hottie like that was single.

Somebody had to have taken the time to photoshop the shit out of his picture before uploading it to the dating profile.

Of course, my boss had used the photo from my employee badge, in which I was rocking the "deer in the headlights" look in a suit that was too big for my lanky body. Thankfully, I appeared more disillusioned now than surprised, and I could afford suits tailored to my size.

It didn't matter. I had no intention of going through with this date. The only reason I'd shown up was to tell the guy it was all a mistake. Yeah, dick move, but ghosting him was an even bigger asshole move.

After that, I planned to pick up some food and head home to binge-watch some of my favorite shows until I passed out and had to go to work the next day. And when Sebastian asked about the date, I'd say it didn't work out and he'd drop it. Quick. Clean. Easy.

Except the date I was meeting actuallywasa hottie.

The toe of my shoe caught on the lip of a step as I gawked at the stranger and I tripped, nearly face planting no more than five yards away. Catching myself at the last second, I glanced up to find that he'd pushed to his feet from where he sat on a bench and walked toward me. Of course, he'd caught my clumsy act. The tips of my ears burned as I straightened my coat and suit jacket. Great first impression.

Nope. Didn't matter.

I'd tell him the truth, and we'd go our separate ways. Never to meet again. First impressions weren't important.

"Kaylan?" the man inquired as he drew closer. His voice was deep with the slightest hint of a rasp. Was that natural, or was he recovering from a cold? Regardless, it was sexy.

The only turnoff was the dark sunglasses hiding his eyes. It was a gray, dreary day. There was zero call for the shades. Probably hiding bloodshot eyes that drooped from his hangover. Hottie needed a few drawbacks before I did something stupid like go through with this setup.

I was still trying to decide if he was hungover or thought himself too cool in sunglasses when I replied, "Yes, I'm Kaylan Baumgartner. You're Arden?"

"Arden Fischer," Hottie introduced, extending his hand. I took it and had to suppress a shiver that tried to run wild through my body. Okay, so he had great hair, a sexy smile, and a big strong hand. Fine. He was sexy. Maybe he was sexy enough for sunglasses on a cloudy day.

"I'll admit, after reading your profile, I didn't think you'd show."

Without thinking, I took a step back and shoved my hands into my pockets while

once again cursing Sebastian. My boss was turning into the bane of my existence. “What do you mean? What’s in my bio that made you think I’d do something so rude?”

“No!” Arden waved both hands at me. “I didn’t mean it like that. Just...you’re so adorable and hot. I thought this had to be a practical joke. I mean, it’s not like the app can filter out the jokers and the fakes, right?”

“Yeah, no, right?” I babbled, huffing out the most awkward laugh of my life. At least he didn’t sound as pretentious as he looked.

Death to Sebastian.

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Death to his fellow minion, Byron Graham. He'd probably helped our boss create this stupid bio.

And adorable? No. Not even close. Maybe Arden was blind, and that was why he was wearing sunglasses.

As we stood there awkwardly, I sneaked another glance up his body. He was dressed in a pair of dark slacks with a heather-gray V-neck sweater over a black T-shirt. His heavy coat hung just below his waist, providing a good glimpse of his muscular body. This was a man who liked to work out. No bulging muscles, but I doubted I'd be able to locate even an ounce of fat on his body.

If this wasn't some painful setup but rather a random hookup, I'd be happy to go looking for that fat with a magnifying glass.

Well, that said way too much about my priorities. Happy with a one-night stand but not a date? Ugh. Sebastian might be right that I needed to get back out there.

"Well, umm...technically, I didn't sign up for this," I admitted. Time to bite the bullet.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

I lowered my gaze to the ground, watching as I traced the toe of my shoe along a crack in the sidewalk. "Someone else put my information into the app and signed me up for this blind date thing."

My heart skipped at the low, throaty laugh that rose from Arden and I jerked my head up to find him grinning. “Meddling sister?” he asked.

“No, meddling boss.”

“What? Really? Your boss?”

I dredged a sigh from the very bottom of my soul. “Yeah, my boss. He’s one of those types who likes to chat about everyone’s private life and wants everyone to be blissfully in love. It’s weird. Apparently, when he found out that I wasn’t dating anyone and hadn’t dated in a couple of years, he came up with the brilliant idea of setting me up.”

“Wow...I...I...I got nothing,” he finished with a shake of his head. “Seriously, I’ve never known a boss like that.”

I shrugged. “Sebastian can be weird, but he’s a good boss. Cares a lot about the well-being of his employees.”

“Clearly.” Arden chuckled. “But doesn’t that app have to be on your phone? For our date, you had to get instructions on where to meet.”

I lifted my left hand out of my pocket and showed him a battered smartphone. “This is my phone.” Then I lifted my right hand out of my other pocket and displayed a brand-new black smartphone without a case. “This is a new phone my boss bought so he could set me up on a blind date.”

Arden threw his head back and laughed, filling the area with that deep, joyous sound. I swore it created a break in the perpetual cloud cover, offering up the sweetest taste of spring. I dragged in a breath and chortled. There was no stopping it. The happiness falling off Arden was soaking into me, chasing away the chill and the grumpiness.

“Your boss is a riot,” Arden proclaimed when his laughter died off.

“He keeps things interesting.” I shoved both phones into my pockets again and rocked on my feet, feeling a little less awkward but also not sure what to do next. The original plan to brush this guy off didn’t seem so great now. Or at least I wasn’t in such a hurry to move along. Of course, that didn’t mean Arden had any interest in sticking with me after he’d been set up with someone who didn’t want to be there in the first place.

I cleared my throat and forced a smile. “Look, you thought you were getting someone who knew all about this blind date event. I wasn’t even the one who filled out the profile. God only knows what Sebastian put in mine. So, if you don’t want to do this date thing, I get it. No hard feelings. I’m sorry you got sucked into my boss’s insanity.”

“Well,” Arden began only to pause and lick his lips. “Since we’re being so honest.” He reached up and removed his glasses to reveal not bloodshot eyes, but eyes of two startling colors.

“Whoa!” I gasped and then winced at my complete inability to temper my reaction to something less insulting. “Sorry. I mean...umm...cool.”

Arden hooked one arm of his sunglasses on the V of his sweater and smiled. He lowered his head, staring more at the ground than meeting my gaze. “No. It’s okay. It’s called heterochromia. Just one of those things people are born with.”

“Yeah, I knew a girl in college who had that, but...”

The man tipped his head up and smirked, even though he wasn’t quite looking at me. “Not as stark?”

“Yes.” I exhaled. Jennifer’s eyes were brown and light hazel. In most indoor lighting, you didn’t even notice the difference in colors unless you were close to her.

But Arden’s eyes were astounding. His left was a brown so dark that it almost appeared black, while his right was a pale sky blue.

“I usually wear colored contacts on dates for a while, so I don’t make my date uncomfortable. But I didn’t realize that I was out of contacts until I was getting ready this afternoon.”

“I’m not uncomfortable!” My voice jumped a conspicuous octave or two, making me wince and Arden grin. “I’m trying not to stare, but I’m also trying to meet your eyes as we talk and still not stare.”

“The ultimate catch-22,” Arden teased.

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“Totally.”

A silence settled between us, but it didn't feel all that uncomfortable. At least, not as awkward as I would have expected. He seemed like an interesting, easygoing guy that I wouldn't have minded chatting up while standing in line for my morning coffee. If I were at all brave, I would have hit on him at a bar.

But I wasn't brave in dating.

Which was why I was in this situation.

A bitter wind rushed through the city, rattling the bare tree limbs and sending dead leaves scratching and twirling along the sidewalk. I ducked my head down and lifted my shoulders while gathering my coat tighter around me. For a moment, I'd forgotten about the gray skies and the bitter cold nipping through my clothes at my flesh.

“Did you have other plans for today?” Arden asked.

“A hoagie, steak fries, and some TV binging. I can't go back to work, or my boss will know I bailed on my date.”

Arden rubbed his jaw, something like mirth sparkling in his pale eye. “Those aren't terrible plans. But, you know, since we're here...would you be interested in wandering through the art museum like we were supposed to? We could list all the ways we're a terrible match for each other.”

My heart skipped, and I couldn't stop my grin. “You mean like a reverse interview

where you showcase all your worst qualities and why you'd be a horrible match."

"Precisely. But you can't make anything up. That's one of my big turnoffs: dishonesty. These have to be genuine weird traits and quirks."

Did I want to spend a couple of hours with Arden, trying to scare him away?

Sure. Why not?

There was no pressure to impress him or win him over. Just two acquaintances getting to know each other while appreciating some art.

"Sure. Sounds like fun."

2

ARDEN

Kaylan was adorable.

Even more adorable than I'd been expecting from his picture. Now I was curious to see if there was a vast difference between what his boss had put in his bio and the real person walking with me to the front doors of the art museum.

Maybe I shouldn't be too excited, though. Tim had been adorable, and that hadn't worked out. In fact, it had been one of my more nightmarish attempts at dating.

Nope. That didn't matter.

Not thinking about Tim. Not today.

Kaylan was getting my full attention. He deserved that. Even if he wasn't interested in dating, he could be a fun friend to hang out with.

A friend I'd love to kiss and nuzzle and find all the spots on his body that made him squeal. Yeah, that kind of friend.

It might be better if I redirected my thoughts to things that didn't require me to undress the man.

"So, if your boss wouldn't be upset with you returning to work early, would you go back instead of taking the rest of the day off?" I asked.

Kaylan shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Sure. Why not?"

I stopped walking, my eyebrows leaping up my forehead. "It's a day off. Why pass it up?"

"I like my job. Even if I'm just an assistant. Sebastian and Byron are incredibly smart, and I'm learning a lot from them. It also doesn't hurt that I never know what to expect on any given day. Once, Sebastian stormed out of his office and declared that he was dragging me and Byron to the zoo to watch the big cats. He was trying to come up with a new type of loungewear that was good for lazing about and bursts of activity. In his opinion, no one was better at that than cats."

"You work for a clothing designer?"

Kaylan shook his head, his dark-brown hair falling down into his eyes. "Not really. Sebastian runs a large conglomerate of companies, and one business is clothing. Marketing and logistics are the biggest divisions." Kaylan tipped his head to the side as we walked. "What do you do for a living?"

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“Freelance graphic artist. I take on a variety of clients, from cleaning products to publishing companies. Somebody always needs something interesting designed.”

Kaylan grunted. “And being a freelancer, that means you can make your own hours and take the day off whenever you want.”

I rubbed the side of my nose. “That’s the idea, but I think I’m about as good as you are when it comes to taking breaks. I like my job, and I get caught up in my work too often.”

“Oh, shit.” Kaylan stopped walking, his eyes wide.

I whipped my head around and my heart sank. The art museum was closed for renovations. “Well, damn.” There went my plans for a long, slow wander and pleasant conversation.

Kaylan made a face. “That stupid app got us here. I assumed it wanted us to go to the art museum for our date, but it’s closed.”

“Have you ever been to Krohn Conservatory?” I asked, brain scrambling for an alternative that was close. Anything that was too far might be too much effort, and Kaylan had made it clear that he didn’t want to be there. Easy was best.

Hands in his pockets, Kaylan rocked on his heels, moving his head from the left to the right so that the hair that fell in front of his eyes moved to the side. “Not since elementary school. I think we went on a field trip to see the Christmas decorations one year.”

My hand itched to reach up and brush those sleek locks from his forehead, but that seemed a little too forward for this non-date, reverse interview. It was easier to keep them balled into fists at my sides.

“Would you be interested in a stroll through the flowers with me? It’s just on the other side of the park.”

To my shock, Kaylan’s expression lit up. “Sure. I’ll follow you over in my car. I don’t get up to Eden Park too often.”

“Got it.”

With renewed energy, we walked to the parking lot in front of the art museum and climbed into our respective cars. I led the way in our two-car caravan, down the winding narrow roads past the silent mirror lake and the overlooking gazebo. During the summer, bright flowers, sunbathers, and people walking their dogs filled the park. It was a peaceful spot to relax and offered a magnificent view of downtown Cincinnati.

In winter, the place was dreary and empty. The primary draw was Krohn Conservatory, with its holiday display and live nativity scene in December. I’d never been up here for Valentine’s Day, but I was hoping they had something for the romantic holiday. If this was a bust, I’d have to take it as not meant to be.

As we zipped past the gazebo and up another winding hill on the opposite side of the park, I released a heavy sigh of relief to see bundled-up people walking toward the enormous glass-and-steel structure. Built in the early 1930s, the flower conservatory possessed elegant art deco touches that still graced the structure to this day.

Taking the drive that led to the small parking lot behind the building, I pulled into a

spot that had an opening on my right so Kaylan could park his tiny silver electric BMW beside my SUV.

“Wow. I forgot how big this place was,” Kaylan announced as we met up behind our cars.

He’d barely finished speaking when another gust of icy wind swept through, causing us to huddle against it. I reached out and wrapped an arm around Kaylan’s shoulders, pulling him closer to my body so I could shield him from the cold. “Let’s hurry and get inside, where it’s warmer.”

I half expected Kaylan to pull away, but he smirked at me and continued across the parking lot and down the sidewalk to the front of the building. As soon as we stepped into the building, we sighed happily at the welcoming heat.

Grinning, Kaylan darted ahead of me and bought two tickets. I didn’t argue. Yeah, this was a non-date, but I had a feeling guilt was nibbling at Kaylan over his boss’s weird tricks. This was his way of apologizing and I’d allow it, but this was it.

After stepping into the main entrance hall, my eyes lifted to the glass ceiling that towered at least three stories overhead. In front of us was the rainforest exhibit with its tall palm trees and lush greenery that stood in direct contrast to the brown, icy death outside. I slipped out of my coat and draped it over my arm as I dragged in a deep breath filled with warmth, humidity, and elegant floral notes. The only sounds were soft conversation and the distant sound of falling water crashing onto rocks.

“This...this is so peaceful.”

I glanced over to find Kaylan holding his coat in front of him. His eyes were closed, and a hint of a smile played on his pink lips. The wind had mussed his dark-brown hair, but that only made him more handsome in my book. Wrapped in his

designersuit, his slightly messy hair made me hope this guy wasn't all serious and business. That maybe he had some hidden depths to go with the mischievous grin I'd caught sight of here and there.

"A pleasant break from work?"

Kaylan cracked one eye open and smirked. "Possibly. I think it's still early to call. Which way?"

I nodded to his right. "We'll begin with the seasonal display. It leads to the desert room, orchid display, and the bonsai exhibit."

Kaylan walked in the direction I'd indicated. "Sounds like you've been here a few times before."

"I pop in several times a year. They have different seasonal exhibits, plus it's a quiet place to think and look for inspiration."

We stopped just past the entrance to the smaller room, taking in the explosion of tulips and red roses artfully arranged around a three-tiered fountain in the center of the room. It was as though spring had erupted inside of the giant greenhouse.

"Beautiful," Kaylan murmured as he started forward. He dug his phone out of his pocket and snapped a handful of pictures. He looked over his shoulder and grinned. I liked that. The man seemed to smile so easily, his face always incredibly expressive. As if he couldn't hold his emotions back. There was no hiding for Kaylan. "I think you mentioned something about detailing all the reasons we're so very undateable."

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“I did. Do you want to start, or should I?”

“I’ll go first, but I’ll warn you; I’ve got something that could end this competition right here and now.” Kaylan shoved his phone into his pocket and continued past the fountain to the far corner.

“Go for it.” Short of being a murderer, rapist, or serial cheater, I couldn’t imagine what he could do that would be such a deal breaker.

Kaylan stopped walking and leaned toward me. Dropping his voice to a whisper, he admitted, “I hate chili.”

“What?” I demanded in a choked laugh. Not what I’d been expecting him to say. “You hate chili? Were you even born in this area?”

“Born and raised. I went away to Boston University for college and then returned. But yeah, can’t stand chili. Any and all chili. Never liked it.”

I made a show of shaking my head and clicking my tongue at him. In Cincinnati, chili was serious business. Mostly because Cincinnati had its own distinct style and way of eating chili. You couldn’t swing a dead cat and not hit a chili parlor in this town. Every person born in the tri-state area had an opinion about chili.

“So there’s no point in asking you the perennial Gold Star versus Skyline question.”

“None.”

“Or if you prefer a coney to a three-way?”

“Ugh. Neither.”

As we reached the corner of the room and stopped under the lemon tree, I couldn’t help nudging his shoulder with mine. “Is there anything you like as a three-way?” I asked in a low voice.

Kaylan snorted. “Why do I get the impression you’re not talking spaghetti anymore?” He bumped me back. “I’m not much of a sharing person, so I can’t imagine there are any three-ways that I’d be a fan of. You?”

I shook my head as a bit of tension unwound from around my lungs. “The only three-ways I like are spaghetti, chili, and a mountain of cheddar cheese. And, for the record, I’m a Skyline fan, but I won’t turn my nose up at a Gold Star coney. Also, you not liking chili is not a deal breaker. Try again.”

My pseudo-date tipped his head up toward the tree and pointed at a lemon nearly lost among the dark-green leaves. “Stupid question: do you think that’s real?”

“Are you asking me if the flower conservatory has a fake tree in it?” I replied, trying very hard not to laugh.

Kaylan poked me in the ribs with his elbow. “Shut up. I said it was a stupid question. I was just thinking that I’ve never seen an actual lemon tree. Lots of lemons in the grocery, but never on a tree. That’s kind of cool.”

I was going to kiss him. If this man kept being so adorable, I was going to kiss him. It was taking all of my self-control not to dip my head and steal a kiss off those pink lips.

My companion narrowed his eyes at me. “What are you grinning at? I’m not always an idiot. This surprise arranged date caught me flat-footed. I’m not at my smartest right now.”

“So you’re warning me that I won’t be able to keep up once you get your bearings?” I teased.

A little scoff left his throat. “Whatever. Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re trying to decide between laughing and kissing me.”

Okay, that was rather astute.

Thankfully, Kaylan didn’t give me the chance to answer. He grabbed my wrist with his free hand and pulled me toward the open doorway. “What’s over here?”

“The Desert Room,” I replied, still smiling at the back of his head.

We left spring behind in the bright-and-humid exhibit hall for a more arid room overflowing with cacti and other plants only found in the desert. Everything in the room possessed prickles, which seemed very suited to Kaylan. The man still holding my wrist as we started along the aisle was full of protective prickles, but that didn’t deter me. There would be ways past the thorns to get to the softness I knew had to reside inside of him.

“You got one of my least desirable traits. It’s your turn,” Kaylan prodded.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I lifted my gaze to a tree that had stretched across the low ceiling of the room. This was my idea. However, I was now questioning my sanity.

This was supposed to be fun. Not about sending Kaylan running away from me. “Um...I guess...I have a somewhat obsessive personality. I get in moods where I obsess over a single thing.”

Kaylan released my wrist as if he suddenly remembered that he was holding it and flashed me a crooked grin. He tucked that hand with the other holding his coat. “Obsessed, huh? Give me an example. You don’t get obsessive over the person you’re dating, do you?”

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“No! No! Nothing like that!” My heart leaped into my throat and refused to climb down at that question. “I obsess over things or food. For example, for two months, I had to have a bowl of cereal before going to bed or I couldn’t sleep. After I got over that, I couldn’t stand to eat cereal for months. Or I binge a particular TV show or style of books. During that period, nothing else will interest me much.” I winced. “I’ve driven a couple of exes crazy with that trait.”

Kaylan shrugged and continued to amble among the cacti. “What kind of shows? Reality TV?”

I shook my head even though he couldn’t see it. “Mostly anime and serial killer documentaries.”

The sexy man in front of me chuckled. “Everyone is hooked on serial killer documentaries.” He paused and looked over at me. “What kind of anime?”

There was something in his voice that left me thinking that despite his attempt to sound casual and indifferent, this was a very important question for him. Could he be an anime watcher as well?

“Probably not stuff that would interest you. It’s mostly the slice of life, romantic, BL—I mean boys love—anime.”

Kaylan turned around to face me and lifted one haughty eyebrow. “You’re standing here with a gay man. Do you think I don’t know what BL is?”

That was a good point. But I hadn’t expected him to know in relation to anime. Did

that mean...?

“Some of my favorites are Sekaiichi Hatsukoi, Given, and Junjo Romantica—even with its very questionable first episode,” Kaylan proclaimed as he walked toward me.

“Because you’re hooked on Usagi’s domineering, possessive nature while being insecure over Misaki’s feelings for him,” I finished.

“Yessss!” he hissed, eyes wide and teeth clenched. “And then you get to watch Misaki’s slow realization that he’s so deeply in love with Usagi and would be lost without him. That entire scene at the train station on the phone?—”

“Where he’s just wanting some little sign from Usagi that he wants Misaki to stay with him?—”

“It kills me every freaking time I watch it. I want to cry while shaking Misaki.”

And now we were finishing each other’s sentences. At least with anime, we had some overlap in our interests, and we were doing a horrible job of scaring each other away.

“Have you watched Dakaichi?” I asked to keep from kissing him.

“That’s the one with the two actors who fall in love, right?” Kaylan tipped his head back and moaned softly as he closed his eyes. “So sexy.” His head popped up and his eyes snapped open. “And they made the older veteran actor the shou and the young guy the gong! I love it!”

Gong? Shou? Those were not Japanese terms for top and bottom. That was Chinese!

I grinned at him. “You don’t just watch anime. You read danmei, too.”

Kaylan's mouth fell open and his eyes unfocused for a second, as if he were rewinding what he'd said to give that away. It took only another second before he was groaning and nodding. "Yes, yes. I watch yaoi anime, and I have read an obscene amount of Chinese BL. Now that you've pried my dark secret out of me and you know whatdanmeiis, I can admit that when I saw your eyes for the first time, my initial thought was that you were Hua Cheng reincarnated."

My breath caught in my throat and my heart stopped at his words. He was comparing me to the sexiest, most dangerous, most romantic ghost king that was ever written. I stood frozen as Kaylan cocked his head to one side and lifted his hand, covering my pale right eye without touching my face. He smiled as he stared at me. "Sexy, broken Hua Cheng, who tore out his own eye in a fit of madness and heartbreak over his sweetdianxia."

"You've left me with no choice," I whispered.

Kaylan lowered his hand back to his side. "What?"

"I have to kiss you now."

3

KAYLAN

I had no words.

My tongue was tied with no hopes of untangling.

What was I supposed to say to that?

I mean other than "Yes, please."

Arden was sweet, sexy, and he smelled so good. That really shouldn't be a deciding factor, but when the man had gathered me close to hurry us inside the conservatory, I caught a whiff of his cologne. Or maybe aftershave. Or it was the natural pheromones the man exuded. Whatever. I just wanted to turn in his arms, bury my nose in the crook of his neck, and never leave.

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But that was all nonsense.

This was a non-date.

A reverse interview.

We were supposed to be listing all the reasons we were unsuitable for dating.

Except Arden had admitted to liking one of my big weaknesses in the world. I loved losing hours binge-watching my favorite animes. Was it too much to hope that he liked Asian BL dramas as well?

Nope. I couldn't ask.

I wasn't looking to date. There was no time in my life. Everything was fine how it was now. I had work and my hobbies. Dating and a boyfriend would mean less me time when I wasn't working.

However, a boyfriend would put sex into my life again. That was something I was significantly short on.

Arden stepped closer, and I didn't back away. I couldn't. Yes, we'd just met, but I wanted to know what it was like to kiss those lips. He was checking so many damn boxes for me without realizing it. Life couldn't be so cruel as to make him a terrible kisser. No, he had to be the best kisser in the world, and I needed to experience it.

The little desert had become silent. Even the wind had stopped flinging bits of debris

at the surrounding windows. We were lost in our own world. Just his breath and mine picking up. His hand landed on my shoulder, squeezing and drawing me in. I went willingly, tipping my head up, offering my lips like a sacrifice on the altar of the BL gods who knew I needed to get laid so fucking bad.

A woman's high-pitched cackle cut through the quiet, jerking me away from Arden. A nervous giggle tumbled from my lips, and I leaned to my left, looking around him. Two couples were entering the desert room with some kids in tow.

Yeah, time to move on.

"Whoops," I said with a laugh, while wincing at my inescapable awkwardness. "Umm...what's the next room?"

Arden's grin returned with an extra twinkle in his mismatched eyes, as if he were smothering his own chuckle. "The orchid room is through that door." He released my shoulder and pointed at the clear door just ahead of us. Beyond the glass was a small, lush, green room filled with delicate blossoms.

I hurried on, trying to put some distance between us and the people who were working their way through the desert behind us. Humidity and thick warmth greeted us as we stepped inside, along with the soft trickle of water from a fountain hidden behind all the dense green foliage. After fishing my phone from my pocket, I snapped countless images of the different orchids. I'd always been a fan of this ethereal blossom, but I'd never buy one for myself. They were finicky plants, and I sucked at remembering to water anything. It would break my heart if I killed something so lovely.

"Kaylan?"

I turned my head toward Arden and found the man was holding up his phone as if he

were using the camera feature. Specifically, he was taking my picture.

“Really? Why?”

“Because you’re adorable,” Arden answered without hesitation as he lowered his phone. “I doubt you even realize it, but you’ve been cooing and whispering to the flowers as you take their pictures. Telling them how pretty they are. I needed something to remember this moment.”

And now my face was on fire, from the tips of my ears to the base of my throat. I hadn’t known I was doing that.

A scoff left me, and I spun around. “Whatever. They’re beautiful. I’ve never seen some of these species.”

“Do you grow orchids?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I’d never be able to keep one alive. I just like them.” As I led the way out of the tiny room to the next one, Arden caught the collar of my sport coat, stopping me.

“You miss that one?”

Turning to gaze at where he pointed, I found a cascade of tiny blood-red and white blossoms on what appeared to be a crooked vine. That one was definitely new to me. After shooting Arden a repressive look that did absolutely nothing, I took a few pictures of the orchids while managing not to talk to them.

The next room felt bright and airy compared to the orchid exhibit. I didn’t even bother to put my phone away. These needed to be photographed as well. Other people milled about the larger room, talking softly and admiring the plants.

“I believe it’s your turn,” Arden prodded while I admired a ficus someone had trained to resemble a grove of trees in a miniature forest. A forest that was already older than me. I didn’t need to ask what he meant. Since we couldn’t sneak a private kiss, we returned to our original game.

“I’m lazy,” I blurted out. If there was one thing I wished I could change about myself, this was it. “I hate going to the gym and I hate working out. After I finish work, I like to throw on some baggy shorts or jogging pants and a T-shirt. I live in those clothes until I can’t stand the smell.” A frown formed on my lips, and I moved down to the bonsai sculpted from a crown of thorns. “Motivation is my middle name at work. But when I get home, I’m drained and I don’t want to move.”

“I don’t love working out either,” Arden admitted, which only earned his muscular ass a look. I slowly turned toward him and dragged my eyes up his body, from his nice dark loafers to his trim waist and broad chest to his equally broad shoulders.

“I refuse to believe you were born looking like that,” I muttered.

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Arden rolled his eyes. “No, I don’t enjoy working out, but I don’t let it stop me from going. Heart disease and diabetes run in my family. Staying healthy means I stay ahead of it.”

A little grunt escaped me, and I continued to stroll through the room, snapping pictures. “I guess that’s a good excuse.”

“You know,” Arden started. The man had walked up behind me and his hot breath had brushed across the shell of my ear. He was evil. So fucking evil. It was as though he knew that if he used that low, seductive, teasing tone, I’d do whatever he wanted. “If you wanted to try it out, I’ve found that going to the gym with someone helps to keep you motivated. You wouldn’t even have to do anything more complicated than walk on the treadmill.”

“Are you offering to be my workout buddy?”

“Oh, no. Definitely not. You need to find someone else,” he answered brusquely.

He jumped back laughing as I whipped around and hit him on the chest with both fists. Thankfully, he captured my wrists before I could hurt myself further. Hitting his chest was like hitting a damn rock!

My breath caught in my throat as he pulled me in closer, his eyes locked on my lips. Now I was going to get the kiss I’d almost tasted in the desert.

Except one of the kids who had entered the desert was in the bonsai room, squealing about the tiny trees. A little kiss wouldn’t be too harmful for the tyke, but I suspected

I would not be content with a safe, chaste peck.

Blargh. Some stranger's kid was cockblocking me.

At least, that was the reason I claimed as I pulled away from Arden with a smirk. Although I had thought up some other nonsense about not wanting to date and this being a non-date, it was hard to remember when I could still feel the heat of Arden's powerful hands on my wrist.

"Okay. Fine." I walked toward the door leading into the first exhibit we had entered. "If you don't want me, I'll find someone who does."

Three steps.

That was as far as I got before a hand landed on my hip and squeezed, burning through all the layers of clothes to scorch my skin.

"Whatever gave you the impression that I didn't want you?" Arden demanded in a low, husky voice that was shutting down all higher brain function.

Would it be tacky to screw him against the wall on the first non-date?

I could live with being tacky.

And desperate.

And begging if it meant I could have Arden for a night.

But there was something serious and soft about Arden's heart that left me sure he wasn't a one-night stand kind of guy. He was the happily-ever-after kind that wanted wedding rings and a white picket fence.

There was nothing wrong with that. I just wasn't confident something like that was in my future. I had spent much of my life getting good grades, a good job, and then keeping up with the insanity that was Sebastian. Being in a forever relationship hadn't crossed my mind.

Maybe it was time.

"So...isn't there a waterfall in this place?" I asked, trying for a normal tone and missing by a wide mark.

Arden chuckled and gave my hip one last squeeze prior to releasing it. "Yeah, there is."

We cut through the display of spring flowers and turned left, descending the peach marble stairs with the swirling silver handrail into a dense rainforest that towered over our heads.

The air was once again humid and heavy with a hushed sound of rushing water somewhere ahead of us. On my left was a narrow stream that could be glimpsed between the large green leaves. Scales of white and orange flashed in the waters as giant koi lazily swam by and then darted off. It was like stepping into another world, leaving behind all of Cincinnati and its dreary winter sky.

I dragged in a deep breath and released it with a happy sigh. "I can understand why you come here often. It's so peaceful and beautiful. Do you bring a lot of dates here?"

Arden shook his head. "I wish I could say you're the first, but Tim—my ex—and I came here together a few times. He didn't like the Christmas exhibit because it was too chaotic and busy. We just didn't time it right."

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, not liking the hints of a frown now

digging lines around his eyes. “Were you and Tim together long?”

“Not really. Couple of years. We separated about six months ago.”

Swinging about, I glared at him. “This asshole cheat on you?”

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“No!” Arden gasped, only to have it turned into a soft laugh. “No, it was an amicable split. All the passion had gone out of our relationship, and we didn’t like any of the same things. He was Kardashians, reality TV, and shopping.”

A snort escaped me. “Let me guess, you’re anime, ramen noodles, and sweat pants.”

“I thought that was you?” Arden teased. The fire returned to my cheeks, but I didn’t get the chance to respond. “However, you are right. That sounds like a great night to me. I like to travel, too. Take lots of pictures and make sketches to use for work later. Experience new things.”

I did not want to think about how perfect he was. Travel was a definite bonus of my job. I’d been to six countries in the short time that I’d been working for Sebastian, and I had several trips ahead of me this year.

Arden slung his arm across my shoulders and drew me a little closer as we wandered down the narrow path to the waterfall I could see peek through the trees. “What about you? Do you have a long and tragic dating history?”

“More like short and uninteresting. I dated a guy for a few months in college during my senior year. That was my last actual relationship. Since returning to Cincy, I’ve had a few hookups, but nothing serious. I don’t get out much. My focus has been on work.”

“Hence your boss signing you up for a date, since you couldn’t be trusted to handle it on your own.”

I dropped my head, and it ended up resting on Arden's shoulder, confirming that he had a very nice shoulder. "My boss is a handful. He's brilliant, funny, and amazing, but a complete handful."

"Do you regret going to the meet-up?"

Turning my head on his shoulder, I grinned at the sexy man holding me. "Nope. This has been an interesting adventure."

Arden stopped walking, his arm tightening around me. "Do you know what's going to make it better?"

"What?"

"Look up."

That was not what I'd been expecting him to say, but I followed where he was pointing toward the ceiling to see a bunch of yellow-somethings hanging from a tree.

"You've just seen your first banana tree."

Laughter exploded from my throat and I stumbled away from Arden, shaking my head. As I turned back, the man was smiling so wide he looked as if he were going to crack his face.

"I can't believe you!"

"What?" Arden grabbed my balled fist when I pretended to shake it at him. "You've seen a real lemon tree and a real banana tree on the same day. This is big stuff."

"Don't tease me!"

“I’m not.” He pulled me along, skipping the arched bridge over the stream in the center of the room to duck into the tiny cave passageway that led behind the waterfall. “I’ll admit, the first time I saw a live banana tree was here.”

I couldn’t stop grinning at Arden. But then, I was pretty sure I’d been smiling almost from the moment that I met him. He made the world fun and easy. Even something as simple as walking through a botanical conservatory was a lighthearted adventure.

But I was ready to kick this adventure into the realm of something more grown-up. At the very least, it needed to be rated PG-13.

Arden continued to hold my hand through the cave, and my heart sped up. This was it. This was the perfect spot to steal our first kiss. No one was behind us. That cockblocking munchkin was nowhere nearby.

The sexy blond with the mismatched eyes glanced over his shoulder, shooting me a seductive smirk.

And he kept walking.

Right out the other side.

Just. Kept. Walking.

“What?” I squawked. There was no keeping the question inside.

No. No. No. There was zero chance I’d misread him. All the hints and flirting. Arden was into me. Maybe not as much as I was into him, but interested. And I damn well guaranteed he was going to be more than a little interested after I kissed him.

Not to brag, but I was a hell of a kisser.

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I dug my heels in before I could leave the cave and stared openmouthed at him.

Arden snickered and ducked back, leaning in almost close enough to kiss. “I want to kiss you?—”

“The cave is the perfect spot,” I interrupted, already trying to pull him toward the hiding spot.

“But I’m afraid that once I start, I won’t be able to stop. I don’t want another interruption.”

I huffed. “Okay.”

It wasn’t a great excuse, but I’d accept it. For now.

As I followed Arden out of the cave, he shifted his hold to thread our fingers together. “Do you mind?”

“Nope.”

I’d never been much of a hand holder. Fuck, I was pretty sure my mother had been the last person to hold my hand. But it felt good to hold Arden’s hand. It felt right.

“Arden?”

The surprised voice cut above the rush of the falling water, and we turned to see a short, slender, dark-haired man standing on the other side of the bridge with a tall

broad-shouldered blond.

“Tim?” Arden choked out.

Fuck.

4

ARDEN

Tim...was here.

Seeing my ex knocked the breath from my lungs while my brain scrambled to reboot. This was the first time I'd run across him since we'd separated. We didn't have a lot of friends who overlapped, so I'd never heard where he moved to or how he was doing.

Apparently, he'd started dating again.

Fuck. So had I!

Sort of.

Well, I hoped I was dating again.

The interesting man who'd tempted me from my very first glimpse as he approached the art museum now stepped in front of me. I caught a tight smile and something in his narrowed eyes that made me both nervous and excited.

He couldn't be...jealous, could he?

Possessive?

Protective?

If even half of that were true, I was taking Kaylan home and screwing his brains out.

“Hi, I’m Kaylan,” my date introduced, sticking his hand out to Tim.

My ex stared at it for a second with wide eyes and then at me in question before accepting the handshake. “Hello. I’m Tim Lunken.”

“Oh, like the old airport,” Kaylan cheerfully replied.

I bit the inside of my cheek, holding in my goofy grin. Kaylan had not actually put emphasis on “old.” I was just hearing things.

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Or maybe not, considering the way the apples of Tim's cheeks flushed red.

"Yes," Tim agreed flatly. He pulled his hand free of Kaylan's and motioned to the man standing on his right. "This is my boyfriend, Karl."

I clenched my teeth to hold in my anger. It was a struggle to not grind my teeth. Karl, as in Karl from work. As in, "There's nothing going on between us" Karl. "We're just work friends" Karl.

"Nice to finally meet you, Karl. Tim told me a lot about you," I said, trying so very hard to keep my tone flat. I probably shouldn't have said anything at all. Should have been the bigger man. Walked the fuck away.

"Have you been dating long?" Kaylan interjected. He stepped onto the small arched bridge and leaned on the metal railing with the waterfall behind him.

"A few months," Tim answered, not daring to make eye contact with me. "What about you and Arden?"

"We just met today!" Kaylan reached out with the arm that had his coat draped over it and hooked one of his fingers through a belt loop, pulling me in close enough to bump against his chest. With his free hand, he cupped my cheek, tipping my face toward him. "But this has been the best date of my life. I can't wait to see how hetopsit."

My jaw dropped on a choked gasp, and Kaylan struck. The devilish man jerked me in close and plunged his tongue into my mouth. It tangled with mine and I couldn't stop

myself from wrapping one arm around his slender waist, pulling him in even closer.

Kaylan was pure magic. With one toe-curling kiss, my ex and his new boyfriend disappeared. The crashing water of the two-story, man-made waterfall vanished. All sounds fell away, so that there was only the wet heat of Kaylan's hungry mouth demanding that I do dirty, dirty things to him. And God help me, I wanted to. My body ached to give him everything that kiss was begging for and more.

Time slipped away from me, and I was more than a bit dazed when Kaylan broke off the kiss and glanced to his left from the corner of his eye. I followed his gaze to find that we were alone. Tim and Karl had left, but I had no idea how long we'd been alone.

"It's okay if you hate me now," Kaylan murmured, sliding one finger across his damp bottom lip.

"I'm sorry, what? Why would I hate you?" Had Kaylan killed brain cells with that kiss? I wasn't following.

He released me and shrugged one shoulder as he fully leaned on the railing. "I wasn't thinking. He just...I don't know...something about him rubbed me the wrong way. Sounded like his new boyfriend is someone he knew while you were together, which makes me angrier. If he was cheating on you, I hope there's a plant in here that can eat both of them."

I stepped into Kaylan again, placing one hand on his hip while resting my forehead against his. "You mean like an Audrey II."

"Precisely."

And, of course, my geeky heart soared that he'd gotten my dorky Little Shop of

Horrorsreference.

“I don’t know if he technically cheated. Karl is someone he works with. He said they were just friends.” This time, it was my turn to shrug as I lifted my head. “Feelings for Karl might have been what pushed him to end our relationship.”

Kaylan jerked his head back and narrowed his eyes at me. “You don’t sound or look upset by any of this. Why?”

“Maybe it’s because I’m over Tim, and any anger I felt was my ego being tweaked.” I leaned in close, placing my lips right beside Kaylan’s ear. “But it might also be from the amazing kiss I just received.”

“Mmmm...” Kaylan hummed. “I’m a polyglot. Makes for a very limber, talented tongue.”

I jerked away from my date, my head falling on an explosion of laughter. Of all the things I’d expected him to say, that was not it.

“It shows,” I agreed when I caught my breath. Taking his hand, I tried to pull him to the path so we could continue, but Kaylan tugged me in the opposite direction.

“Wait. We need a selfie, and this is the perfect spot.”

“To mark the occasion of our first kiss?” I asked as I returned to his side.

“I wasn’t going to be that sentimental. My thought was to prove to my boss that I went out on this date,” he muttered as he fiddled with his phone.

“Got it. Kaylan is not a romantic,” I teased as I stood beside him with an arm wrapped around his waist. The waterfall tumbled behind us while lush greenery

framed the rest of the shot.

“Hey, now! I can be really fucking romantic when I want to be. I just didn’t want to make any assumptions.”

He lifted the phone to get us both in the shot. I rested my cheek against the side of his head and smiled while getting lost in Kaylan’s bright grin.

“What kind of assumptions?” I inquired after he finished snapping pictures and put his phone away.

“You know...assumptions about whether there will be a second date. Or a second kiss.”

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“Or kisses that involve both of us being naked,” I suggested.

“That,” Kaylan said sharply, pointing one finger at me. “That right there is why I think you’re a very smart guy, and I want a second date with you.”

Chuckling, I tugged Kaylan off the bridge so we could continue through the rainforest display. There was still one more room to tackle, which would give me time to figure out how to sneak some more kisses or if I should hang all my hopes on a second date.

“So, Mr. Polyglot, how many languages do you speak?”

Kaylan flashed me a smirk as we climbed the curved marble stairs up to the main entrance of the conservatory. “Fluently? Eight.”

“You’re shitting me,” I scoffed.

He lifted one hand, counting them off on his fingers. “English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean. It was part of the reason I got my job. Sebastian’s executive assistant speaks French, German, Dutch, Hungarian, Polish, and Russian. Sebastian wanted someone to fill in the gaps. When he hired me, I spoke three, but expressed an interest in learning more. Sebastian said that he’d pay to have me professionally trained, and my salary would increase with each language I mastered.”

“That’s amazing.” I reached out and caught his hand, threading our fingers together again. The man with the wicked tongue grinned at me as we turned to the right and headed into the last room—the Fern Room. It was a smaller room with a pond in the

center, while trees and a wide variety of ferns filled almost all the space. There was a little narrow path through the greenery for us to walk, and even here and there, we had to move some leaves aside.

“What exactly do you do for your job?”

“Are we giving up on listing our most unappealing qualities?” Kaylan taunted.

“They weren’t working for me. If that’s your worst, you’re never getting rid of me. I figured we should just get the boring stuff out of the way.”

Kaylan wagged his eyebrows at him. “Got plans for the fun stuff later?”

“Maybe...”

A low snicker escaped Kaylan as he continued to walk. “This is the boring stuff. My job is to do a lot of odd jobs, most of it talking. I talk to all the different departments and department heads, gathering reports and various bits of information. It’s also a lot of meeting prep work. And then there’s research. Sebastian will get this crazy idea, and I have to track down random things for his idea.”

“Sounds...unpredictable.”

Kalyan nodded as he took a picture of some koi swimming around a gray stone mermaid sculpture. “Some days, it’s definitely unpredictable, but there are a lot of days where I know what I’m in for. It’s a nice balance of routine and chaos.” He tucked his phone away and smiled at me, a couple of locks of brown hair falling in front of his eyes. “What about you? I know plenty of graphic designers from work. Do you do your own artwork on the side?”

I couldn’t fight the urge any longer. Reaching up, I brushed his hair away from where

it was in danger of tangling with his long eyelashes. Since I was already taking liberties, I dragged the tips of my fingers along his cheek in a light caress that had Kaylan tipping his head up like a cat seeking affection.

“I create digital art and doodles every once in a while. Not nearly as much as I would like. Since it’s my day job, I don’t feel like drawing in my spare time like I used to.”

“That sucks,” Kaylan mumbled.

One shoulder lifted in a weak shrug. “I enjoy my job, so I don’t mind much. There are plenty of other things, such as hours of anime watching, to keep me occupied.”

I continued on the path to leave the room, but Kaylan caught my elbow, holding me back. The spot we were standing in was heavy with thick leaves crowding close on all sides. It was easy to believe that we were alone in a tropical forest with only a soft trickle of water and hidden animals watching us.

“I’m sorry about what happened with your ex at the bridge,” Kaylan apologized.

“What?” I whispered, completely confused. Was he apologizing because there was a chance Tim had cheated on me? I was over that bullshit. There was nothing between us any longer. Tim had Karl and right now, all my focus was on the frowning man at my side.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you without asking first. Something about Tim made me angry, and I just had to show him up. To prove that you were over him and so much better off without him in your life.” Kaylan’s adorable nose wrinkled. “One of my less-than-stellar traits—I can be impulsive.”

Pinching one of his coat lapels between my thumb and forefingers, I tugged Kaylan in close enough to bump his chest against mine. “You have absolutely nothing to

apologize for. Maybe I was pissy at first, but you reminded me that I am over him and my life is better off without him.” I dropped my head so that my forehead pressed into his. “As a side note, I am so glad you kissed me. I’ve been wanting to kiss you since you confessed that your boss set you up on this date. I was afraid that you’d think I was too aggressive if I kissed you too soon.”

“That is very good to know.”

“Good.”

“This would also be a good time for you to kiss me to prove that you don’t mind me kissing you,” Kaylan teased.

I wanted to laugh, but I wasn’t stupid enough to pass up that oh-so-subtle hint. Tipping my mouth just right, I captured his plush lips in a deep kiss to leave him hungry for a hundred more kisses, just like this. Kaylan’s free hand landed on my chest and slid up, gripping my shoulder as if he wanted to get closer.

But that wasn’t possible. Not here.

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This date needed another stop. A secluded, private one—like his place. Or mine.

5

KAYLAN

The date I hadn't wanted to happen was about to end, and that sucked.

We'd wandered through all the rooms of Krohn Conservatory. The only spot left was the tiny gift shop.

Before Arden could take a single step toward the exit, I darted into the gift shop that was loaded with pretty knickknacks and room for only two or three customers at a time. I had no intention of purchasing anything, but I panicked.

How did I keep this going?

The kisses we'd shared made it clear that Arden was interested. Should I ask him out for an early dinner? There weren't any other romantic indoor spots to hit in Eden Park. If I suggested we wander the park in winter, we would freeze our butts off in a matter of minutes.

Movie? Cliché.

Back to my place? He'd think I was moving too fast.

But where to go? I'd rather we go to my place or even his. We'd been interrupted

enough by random people and ex-boyfriends. I wanted to talk to him alone.

Okay, I wanted to suck on his tongue and other body parts without the risk of being pulled apart.

“Perfect,” Arden announced as he closed his large hand around something. The man was already turning to the cash register before I could see what he’d found.

“What’s perfect?”

“It’s a surprise,” he answered over his shoulder.

I frowned at his back for a second and then looked at the display he’d been standing in front of, trying to figure out what he’d picked up. Flower bulbs, wind chimes, small blown-glass hummingbird feeders, and different handmade ornaments filled the shop. My eyes skimmed over the colorful items, all of it gorgeous, but nothing that struck me as “perfect.”

With no ideas coming to me, I completed a quick circuit through the rest of the store and made it to the cash register run by a white-haired woman as Arden accepted his receipt with one hand and placed his purchase into his pocket with the other. A smug smile graced his lips, and that only made me want to kiss it off his mouth.

“Ready to go?”

“Sure,” I agreed, even as my stomach knotted. Arden had distracted me with his impromptu purchase. Now we were leaving, and I didn’t know what to do next. Maybe it was best to end the date. We could exchange numbers. That way, I’d be able to ask him out after I’d concocted the perfect date. Yes, that was a better idea.

Before stepping up to the exit, I slipped on my heavy wool coat. It was time to leave

the warm, moist air for bitter cold wind as winter fought to remind us it hadn't loosened its grip on the city yet.

"Could you do me a favor?" Arden began as he settled his coat around his shoulders at the same time.

"What's up?"

"Would you be willing to text me one of the selfies you took in front of the waterfall?"

I shot him a smirk. "You just want to get your number set up in my real phone." I waved my actual phone at him while inwardly celebrating. This saved me from trying to figure out how to get his contact information off the phone my boss had purchased.

"It's a two-birds-one-stone scenario," he stated after giving me his phone number. "I get your adorable face for my phone, and I get your number so you can't ghost me the second you walk out the door."

With a snort, I bumped him with my shoulder even as I loaded a text with several selfies I'd taken. "Like I'd fucking do that."

Gentle fingers grazed my cheek, and I looked up to find Arden smiling at me, both his light and dark eyes glittering in the conservatory's glow. "No, you wouldn't."

"There. Sent. You'll have to reply, so I know you got them," I prodded.

Yes, Arden would reply, and I'd somehow use that to kickstart a new conversation that would lead to a date invitation. This was going to work.

The sexy man moved to stand in front of me and picked up my left coat lapel. I

watched as his big hands pinned something to it. When he moved away, my breath caught in my throat.

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A silver butterfly.

He'd gotten me a silver butterfly.

The craftsmanship was exquisite. It was barely larger than a silver dollar, but it was so detailed, it appeared as if it were poised to flap its wings and flutter from my coat.

But more than the fact that it was gorgeous, it was a silver butterfly.

Ghost King Hua Cheng had silver butterflies. Always beautiful, but sometimes deadly protectors he used to guard the one person who was most precious to him.

If Arden was Hua Cheng, did that make me his precious Dianxia?

"Just something to remember this day by. And me," Arden said, his voice growing low and rough at the end.

"I love it. You're right. It's perfect," I whispered, trying not to let my emotions turn me into a complete sap. But it couldn't be helped. Arden had known me for an hour, maybe two, and he'd just handed me the absolute perfect gift.

Catching my hand in his, Arden gave me a little tug, pulling me toward the cold.

We both seemed to forget about it when we stepped outside to find that it was snowing, though. Tiny flakes drifted from the dark-gray sky, blanketing the grass and bushes in white. It must have just started because all but the edges of the sidewalks were clear of the snow.

“Wow. I forgot they were calling for a chance of snow today,” I laughed.

“Well, this throws a wrench into my wicked schemes,” Arden huffed.

My heart skipped around in my chest while I tried to keep my expression bland. “And what wicked schemes were those?”

Arden tightened his grip on my hand as we strolled past the conservatory that glowed against the deepening shadows. I huddled close just in case the wind stirred again. “I was going to see if you were interested in grabbing a somewhat early dinner with me.” He paused and tossed a glare at the heavens. “But with potential for the roads to turn bad, I don’t feel good about keeping you out.”

“Mmm...” I hummed. “Good point. Where do you live?”

“Hyde Park.”

I made a scoffing noise in the back of my throat. “Mr. Freelance Graphic Designer is doing very well for himself,” I teased. Hyde Park was a nice, older neighborhood.

Arden snorted and tapped the tip of my nose. “It’s a small, old house, but yes, I do just fine.”

“Well, your house is closer than my place.” I turned and grabbed the front of his coat, gathering it close to protect him from the biting cold as we stood near the trunks of our respective cars. “I know a great pizza and grinders restaurant between here and Hyde Park?—”

“Are you talking Germantown?” Arden’s eyes lit up like I’d just told him Santa and the Easter Bunny were going to visit him tonight.

“Yes, I’m talking Germantown. You text me what you want and your address. I’ll call in an order and pick it up on the way to your house. We can eat hoagies and binge some TV rather than braving the roads in case it keeps snowing.”

This earned me a hell of a kiss that I did not want to end. It was only when the snow hit the back of my neck that I called for an end to the kiss.

“Good plan,” Arden said. “This’ll give me time to clean up a little.”

I wanted to tease him about that too, but I couldn’t. My apartment was no better. Clothes covered various surfaces and dirty dishes filled the sink. Yes, going to his home was much easier.

Just before we parted, Arden’s fingers caressed the butterfly’s wings on my coat, causing my heart to flutter. There was such a pleased, slightly possessive smile on his lips. That pin would always be a reminder of an amazing first date at the Conservatory, and I hoped it would lead to a very good night.

Jumping into my car, I started it and hit the heater, cranking it as high as it would go. I shifted in my seat to pull my phone out of my pocket and grinned like a lunatic the second Arden’s order pinged through. It was nearly identical to my own. Steak hoagiewith extra pizza sauce, cheese, pickles, and onions with an order of fries. Mine was without the onions, though.

Another text followed it with an address.

I didn’t recognize the street, but it would take two seconds to pop it into the GPS. No big deal.

I called Germantown and placed the order while waiting for my car to warm up and waved to Arden as he pulled out ahead of me. Let him have his head start. I’d be

behind him by only ten or fifteen minutes.

As I ended the call with the restaurant, another call rang through.

From my boss.

My heart did a weird little skip at the sight of his name, and it wasn't a pleasant one. Not that calls from Sebastian were bad. They just always contained work.

Please don't call me back to work. Please don't call me back to work.

"Hello, sir?"

"Kaylan! Excellent! I'm so glad I reached you. Are you okay?" Sebastian's panicked voice filled the car.

"Yes, I'm fine," I replied slowly. "Is everything okay with you? Do you need me to return to the office?" I winced, biting my bottom lip. Why the fuck did I say that?

"No! No! Everything is fine here. In fact, I'm sending people home. Don't want them out in this snow." His voice had returned to its normal light and breezy. "I was just talking to Byron, telling him about how I set you up on a date for Valentine's Day. He's very upset with me."

Kaylan dropped his face into his hand while resting his elbow on the car door. Oh, Lord. Only Sebastian's assistant Byron had the power to make that man sound wounded. Sometimes it was hard to tell who was the assistant and who was the boss between the two of them.

"Anyway, Byron was telling me I put you in danger by setting you up with this complete stranger. Especially since we know nothing about this Cupid matching

system. Hmm... I wonder if I could buy the company and take apart the software. There have got to be other applications for matching people up. If I just?—”

“Sir,” I interrupted. Sebastian could ramble on for hours when a new idea struck him, and I didn’t have hours. I needed to get moving soon, but I was afraid to start for Hyde Park until I knew what he wanted.

“Oh! Right! I’m just calling to make sure that you’re okay, and I didn’t inadvertently place you in the hands of a murderer.”

“No, sir. Arden is not a murderer or a rapist or some otherwise questionable personage threatening my body,” I answered.

“Excellent. That’s very good to hear.” There was a long pause that made my heart squeeze. Air rushed out of me as Sebastian continued, his voice softer and pitched higher. “So...how did the date go? Do you like him? Is he nice? Handsome? Funny? Does he appreciate how smart and efficient you are?”

I caught my laugh behind my teeth and converted it into a low chuckle. It was unlikely Arden appreciated my efficiency the way Sebastian did.

“Arden is very nice and handsome. We had a wonderful date at Krohn Conservatory. He’s a freelance graphic designer and has a great sense of humor. We share many of the same interests.”

“Yes! That’s great! Are you going to see him again? You should have asked him out for dinner! I know many great places. I can call and make you a reservation now.”

What he meant was that he’d shout for Byron and he would make the reservation, but I appreciated Sebastian’s support and enthusiasm all the same.

“Thank you, sir. Actually, I’m about to grab some takeout before heading to his place.”

“Oh, ho! Going to his place. That—” Sebastian broke off and there was another voice in the background that sounded like Byron. “Yes, yes. You’re quite right,” Sebastian murmured to Byron. “Kaylan, I’ll let you go so you can continue your date. Byron has asked that you text either me or him later this evening so that we know you are home safe.”

My heart stuttered. Sebastian could be flighty and impulsive, but he cared about his employees. I was damn lucky to have this job.

“Yes, sir. I will.”

“Have a wonderful night!” Sebastian crowed and ended the call.

Yes, it’s going to be a very wonderful night.

6

ARDEN

The house wasn’t a total wreck, thankfully. Not the cleanest, either.

After tossing my coat across the couch, I attacked the bedroom. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but Kaylan was sending out “fuck me” vibes, and I didn’t want to let him down. That would be rude.

With the bedroom presentable—and maybe condoms and lube placed within easy reach—I tackled the rest of the house. I tossed dirty clothes into the laundry room, chucked dirty dishes into the dishwasher, and ran a rag over the most noticeable

surfaces to get rid of the worst of the dust. I'd just given the main rooms a quick spritz of air freshener to remove any old stale odors the second the doorbell rang.

The air freshener was unnecessary. As soon as Kaylan stepped into the house, the delicious scent of pizza sauce and melted cheese wrapped around me. When I dipped my head to steal another kiss, I was blessed with the alluring woodsy scent of Kaylan's cologne. That was the best combination.

"Hi," I murmured against his neck.

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He made a sound that was almost a giggle. “Feels like you’re happy to see me.”

“I am.”

“And that we haven’t seen each other in a long time.”

“We haven’t.” I kissed my way up his neck to just behind his ear, nuzzling and nibbling until that giggle turned into a breathless moan. The food smelled amazing, but Kaylan was the only thing I was craving.

“So...I was thinking,” Kaylan started, the brown paper bag in his hands crinkling as his fingers tightened on it.

“Thinking is overrated,” I muttered as I worked my way to his jaw with the intention of seizing his lips.

“That maybe we could stick the food in the oven and reheat it later, because you need to fuck me first.”

My head snapped up, and my mouth fell open. Definitely not what I was expecting him to say. “Wow! Your thinking is not overrated. I take that back.” I snatched the bag of food from his hands and hustled to the kitchen, where I put it on the burners. When we needed to refuel, I’d heat the oven and place the food on a cookie sheet. For now, the important thing was returning to the sexy man in my foyer.

On my return trip through the house, I grabbed Kaylan’s hand and nearly dragged him up the old, creaking stairs to the second floor. His laughter followed us along the

way, bringing a smile to my lips.

But the laughter stopped as we reached the bedroom, and I kicked the door shut. He was all mine.

We came together in a rush of hard, desperate kisses and frantic, grabbing hands. I only realized he was still wearing his wool winter coat when I shoved it to the floor, along with his suit jacket.

Kaylan reached skin first, only because I'd shed a few things upon returning home. He swallowed down my groan as those questing fingers found my chest. I loved the tremble in those hands and the frantic need as he straddled one of my thighs, grinding his hard cock into me as if he couldn't stop his body from demanding relief.

"Arden," Kaylan gasped as I got the front of his pants open and shoved a hand into his briefs. Wrapping fingers around that hard cock, I stroked it roughly once before rubbing my thumb across the leaking head. "I...fuck...want...want you inside me...so bad."

A smile formed on his puffy lips while I ran my hand over his dick. "That's the only place I want to be."

"Oh thank God," he exhaled.

I was happy to top or bottom, but there was something about Kaylan that left me needing to fuck him until we were both sweaty and boneless lumps in the bed.

I seized Kaylan's mouth again in another kiss that sapped all thought from my brain. Probably because there wasn't enough blood up there to run it. The poor thing switched over to instinct mode as my cock commandeered all the blood in my body.

We tossed clothes about or dropped them onto the floor in a growing heap as we stumbled onto the bed. Hot skin rubbed together, creating the most intoxicating friction. I captured Kaylan's wrists and pinned them to the pillows, but that didn't stop him. He wrapped his legs around my waist and lifted his hips, rubbing his dick on any part of me he could.

"Fuck you're hot," he said, his hooded eyes running along my chest to my dick, which was more than happy to stand up and preen at being noticed.

"Likewise," I grunted. I released one hand and ran it along his chest, pausing to pluck on one nipple until he hissed with pleasure. Then I continued my course to his flat stomach and the elegant dip inside of his hip bones. My eyes locked on his face as I caressed him, watching the flush rise in his cheeks and lips part on a fractured pant.

Kaylan whimpered and thrust upward into my hand. "I can't believe I just met you today. I wasn't planning to do this..."

"This probably doesn't help, but I don't think this is going to be the only time I fuck you."

The sexy man's eyes fluttered open to view me through little slits. I let go of his dick and slid my fingers lower to just brush against his hole that tightened at my light touch.

"Really?" Kaylan gasped.

"Really. I'm going to fuck you. After we eat, I think I'll suck your cock while we sit on my couch. Then we'll go to the bedroom again, but I'm going to fuck you on the stairs. You might even need to spend the night so I can wake you up by sliding my cock into that tight ass of yours."

A slow smile spread across his lips as if he were the cat who ate the cream. “When do I get to suck your dick?”

“Maybe you can suck my dick while we shower together tomorrow morning before I send you off to work with a sore ass.”

Kaylan shifted his hips, pushing his body toward my probing fingers, but I wasn’t about to penetrate him. Not without lube. I wanted to screw him senseless, but nothing in this world could make me risk hurting him.

“Yes.” Kaylan sighed.

“Yes?”

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“Yes, to all of that.” With his free hand, he crooked his finger and wagged it, beckoning me up to his lips. I captured them in a deep kiss, tangling our tongues together and getting lost in the taste of him. Kaylan broke off the kiss to press a small one to the corner of my mouth. “After that fuck fest, can we maybe discuss a second date?”

“I love this plan.”

“Good. Then fuck me, Arden. Fuck me until I can’t walk.”

I didn’t need to be told again. Lifting enough to break off any more kisses, I fumbled in the nightstand drawer, finally coming up with a condom and the lube. The silver packet sat to the side for now while I worked on getting the lube on my fingers and deep in Kaylan’s ass.

The devil moaned and writhed, fucking himself on my fingers as I stretched his hole. Any hope of taking this slow was thrown out the window almost immediately. His body was hot and tight, pulling me in as if it were the one place in the world that I belonged. After only a few minutes, Kaylan was begging for me to slide inside and I couldn’t fight him.

Pausing only long enough to slip on the condom, I grinned to see Kaylan pop up and flip over to his hands and knees.

He flashed an evil look over his shoulder and wiggled that pert ass. “I want you as deep as you can get.”

Not a problem.

Gripping the base of my cock, I brushed the head against his slick, stretched hole, just barely keeping from plunging into his willing body. I eased into him, inch by excruciating inch. The grip of his muscles and tight channel made my fucking toes curl. I squeezed my eyes shut to stop myself from losing it. The sight of my cock disappearing inside of him was eating away at my self-control.

Kaylan was no help at all. Each desperate little whimper and moan quickened my heart. Sweat glistened across his pale back, begging me to lick it away. Only when I was fully seated inside of him did I dare to lean down and press small kisses up each knob of his spine.

“Okay?” I panted. Full sentences were beyond my grasp.

“Yes. God, yes. Move. Please move,” Kaylan begged. His fingers twisted in the pillowcase in front of him as he hung his head. All his muscles were tensed under pale golden skin that shone under the overhead light. So sexy. Everything about him was sexy.

And if I was lucky, we were going to spend many more evenings doing this, allowing me to explore every nook and cranny of his exquisite body.

As soon as I was sure I had a grip on the orgasm that wanted to break free, I moved.

That was my second mistake.

My first was believing I’d ever had a grip on my orgasm.

Kaylan groaned and met me thrust for thrust. While the sexy man under me might like to give off a respectable, reserved persona when he was out in public, that all fell

away the moment my thick cock filled his ass. Each deep thrust into his tight body brought out a slew of filthy cries and demands. It was like every wall tumbled over and all his darkest desires fell from his lips.

I wanted to fulfill every one of them.

My grunts and Kaylan's loud cries of pleasure accompanied the slap of sweaty flesh.

Just as I was reaching the edge of my control, Kaylan sneaked a hand under his body and started rubbing his dick, his arm moving frantically.

"Come for me," I commanded between clenched teeth. "I want to fucking feel it. Come so hard you forget your damn name." I sped up, pounding into his body even harder, my fingers digging into his ass. He was going to have finger-shaped bruises in the morning, and I was more than willing to kiss every one when they appeared.

"Arden!" Kaylan screamed, my name fracturing like glass in his throat. His entire body tensed, his muscles clamping on my cock so hard I could barely move. I fucked him through his orgasm, allowing mine to shove me off the same cliff as I filled the condom.

Gathering up the very last of my strength, I wrapped a shaking arm around Kaylan's waist and took him with me as I collapsed onto my side on the bed so that I spooned him against my stomach. Still panting like I'd run the Boston Marathon, I tilted my head forward and nuzzled his sweaty hair.

"You good?"

"I...can't...feel..."

"Can't feel what?"

His body shook with a silent chuckle. “My anything.”

I huffed out a laugh and closed my eyes, losing myself for a moment to the feel of Kaylan in my arms, lying right against me. The size difference between us was only a few inches, but it was perfect. He fit my arms as if he were made for them, and I didn’t want him to leave them.

“You know, I think this is going down as my best first date ever,” Kaylan announced, sounding as if he’d caught his breath.

“We haven’t even had dinner and anime yet.”

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A low, sated hum rose from Kaylan's throat as he snuggled a bit closer. "Watch it. I might never leave."

"This might surprise you, but that threat doesn't scare me."

Kaylan twisted in my arms enough to gaze over his shoulder at me. "Does this mean we're going out on another date? You weren't agreeing to a second date just so you could fuck me?"

A wide grin spread across my lips. "Definitely not. I would love to go out with you again."

Sighing, Kaylan settled back on the pillow. "Me too. I hate to admit it, but my boss picked me a winner. Best date that never should have happened."

Yes, it really was.

7

KAYLAN

Arden wastrue to his word.

After sex, there was food, anime, and a blowjob on the couch.

A quick glance out the window revealed that the snow was still falling. We could see the road clearly, but Arden declared it wasn't safe for me to drive home and offered

to share his bed with me. So generous.

Naturally, getting ready for bed meant being fucked on the stairs.

Just as we were settling in, I remembered I was supposed to text Sebastian and Byron that I was home safe.

Shit.

I was safe, but not home.

“I’ll be right back,” I muttered as I slid out of Arden’s cozy embrace and rolled over to pull my phone off the charger.

“What’s wrong?” Arden’s voice was growing groggy and low, as if he were half-asleep already.

“Nothing. I just need to text my boss. He wanted me to text when I got home safe.”

The sexy man stretched under the blankets and chuckled. “Gonna tell him you’re still stuck in my clutches?”

“I have to.”

Rolling toward me, Arden wrapped an arm about my waist and pulled me onto the bed before I could set a toe on his cold hardwood floor. “Stay. It’s just texting. The house is old and drafty. Stay where it’s warm.” His words grew more muffled as he pressed his face into my shoulder and gathered the blankets around me.

How the hell was I supposed to argue with that? I was a strong man, but I didn’t want to meet the person strong enough to walk away from a warm, cuddly lover and into a

cool house.

I'm safe. Thank you for arranging for me to meet Arden.

I paused, still holding the message app open to make sure that it properly sent to both Sebastian and Byron. There was no way my boss was watching for my text, but Byron was always on top of everything. I half expected to see a reply from him.

Two seconds passed and the three dots appeared, indicating that someone was typing.

Safe as in home? Or safe as in you're still wrapped up in Arden's arms?

"Holy shit!" I lurched upright and couldn't stop myself from looking around the room. Did Sebastian have a camera in here? Had he been able to hack my phone?

"What's wrong?" Arden asked. He sat up next to me, his arm tightening as if preparing to protect me from an invisible intruder.

"Look what my boss sent!" I turned the screen toward him so he could read the message.

A loud bark of laughter erupted from his throat, and he fell onto the mound of pillows built against the headboard. "He knows you damn well." Arden shifted in the bed, lying down and pulling the thick blankets up to his chin.

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“Apparently so,” I mumbled as I typed out a response.

Safe as in I’m staying the night with Arden. I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning.

The dots instantly reappeared.

It’s snowing. I don’t like the idea of you on the road tomorrow. Remain at Arden’s for your own well-being.

Sir, the snow has stopped. The roads are clear, I pointed out.

See you on Monday!he replied, in what felt like a cheerful tone.

Tomorrow is Thursday.

The dots appeared again, but this time it was Byron who texted.

Take the hint. Enjoy the long weekend. We will see you on Monday.

“What the fuck...” I whispered, which earned me a kiss on my shoulder.

“Everything okay?”

“Um...change of plans for me.”

“Yeah?”

I set the phone back on the nightstand and burrowed down under the blankets while turning toward Arden. The man was so toasty warm and I loved the feel of his arms around me. I was never a big cuddler, but it was hard to turn away from it when Arden was built for cuddling.

“My boss is worried about the snow on the road.”

Arden snorted and pressed a kiss to my hair. “There is no snow on the road.”

“True, but all the same, he’s given me the next two days off work so that I can stay safe. Any chance you want to have our second date tomorrow?”

The big man sharing the bed with me pulled me in even closer so he could bury his face in my neck, teasing a giggling yelp out of me as the new growth of whiskers on his cheeks tickled. “Yes, I do. But only after I send your boss a giant bouquet of roses and the most expensive bottle of whiskey I can afford.”

“I’ll chip in. I owe him big for this date.”

“We both do.”

I almost hadn’t shown up for this silly date. Thank God I had. Whether it was by chance or science or even fate, I’d fallen into the arms of the most amazing man I’d ever met. And I wasn’t about to let him go anytime soon.

Don’t miss out on Sebastian and Byron’s romance in *The Bargain*.