



Wanting Mrs. Clarke

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: After ending her relationship in New York, 26-year-old Kate attends a lesbian weekend getaway, looking for an escape and a fresh start. There, she meets Hollis, a 44-year-old interior designer looking for her own fresh start now that she's finally ready to divorce her husband.

Their instant chemistry ignites an explosive weekend fling, intended as nothing more than a fleeting escape. But the blazing passion between them lingers in their minds long after they've said goodbye. Months later, Kate's life is just getting back on track, until it's completely upended when she runs into Hollis. Memories of their weekend together come flooding back. Maybe they really did have a chance.

Until Kate discovers her psychology professor is Hollis's soon-to-be ex-husband.

As their reignited passion threatens to unravel a web of secrets and lies, Kate and Hollis are forced to confront their deepest vulnerabilities and fears.

In this scorching story of forbidden love, two restless hearts fight to seize their once-in-a-lifetime chance at love. But can their unquenchable desire overcome the turmoil that threatens to tear their connection apart?

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Kate stretched her arms over her head on the lounge, the sounds of laughter mixing with the beat of the music and water splashing in the pool just a few feet away. The warmth of the sun's rays soaked into her skin, chasing away any memories of her last few days in New York, dreary and full of rain. Her eyes fluttered open, and from behind her sunglasses, she surveyed the pool area and the balconies of the hotel rooms overlooking it. There were beautiful, bikini-clad women everywhere, of all shapes and sizes dancing or mingling with other guests, their skin glistening in the afternoon sunshine. The scent of sunscreen filled the air, and Kate was pretty sure she was in paradise.

Her eyes landed on her best friend, Lexi. She was on her way back from the bar, carrying two brightly colored cocktails, her long black curly hair tied up in a messy bun.

Lexi grinned as she sat down, kicking off her flip-flops as she handed Kate her drink. "Sorry that took so long, but that bartender is dreamy."

"Thanks," Kate said, giving the drink a stir before taking a sip. "Which one?"

"Guess."

Kate glanced over at Lexi before returning her gaze to the bar on the far side of the pool. Three women were behind it, and she instantly knew which one Lexi was talking about. "The blond with all the tattoos?"

“Yep. See, this is why you’re still my best friend.”

Kate had only seen Lexi a handful of times in the last few years. When Kate moved to New York, she’d been so busy, caught up in a whirlwind romance and working three different jobs, that it was just about impossible to get back to California to see Lexi. Thankfully, Lexi came to her a few times for a long weekend.

Now, Kate was sleeping on Lexi’s couch after packing up all her things and leaving New York behind just over a week ago. She was twenty-six years old. She needed to get her life together, but it could wait for another few days. Right now, she just wanted to enjoy her newfound freedom.

“Why didn’t we do this sooner?” Kate asked as she leaned back, leaving her cocktail on the little table between them. “I feel like I’ve died and gone to heaven.” Kate’s gaze lingered on an older woman with dark hair that didn’t quite reach her shoulders. Her shades were on top of her head, and Kate looked away when she’d been caught staring.

“Because, we were both in dead-end unhealthy relationships for the better part of the last five years. But yes, I agree. This is a little surreal. You can tell me I’m right now, by the way,” Lexi said, dropping her shades down to look at Kate directly.

“I can. You were right.” Kate wet her lips. “You were right to get away for a long weekend. We both needed it.”

“Surrounded by beautiful gay women,” Lexi added.

“That does help.”

“Please tell me you’re going to do more than look this weekend.”

Kate inhaled a deep breath. “I want to, but I’ve never really been a one-night stand kind of person, so...”

“Yeah, but after the last five years, you need like a... A cleanse.” Lexi took a sip of her drink. “What about her? The woman in the navy and white striped bikini. She’s been looking this way.”

“I think she was looking at you,” Kate said, rolling her head to the side to watch her friend continue to window shop. “I’m assuming you don’t need a pep talk.”

“Oh, definitely not.” Lexi flashed her a smile.

“See the woman to our left, sitting on the edge of the pool with the short black hair? Red bikini?”

“Kate.” Lexi’s voice held a hint of warning.

“What?”

“She looks just like her. From the side anyway. Probably early forties. The same hair. The same body shape. Come on.”

“Oh.” Kate’s stomach dropped a little.

“You didn’t realize?”

“No.” Kate hadn’t.

“You know you did the right thing.”

“No. I know. I wasn’t happy. And I don’t miss her, in case that’s what you’re

thinking.” Kate honestly hadn’t felt a twinge of sadness since that night she’d finally had it out with her now ex. They’d been good together for maybe a year, and Kate still had no idea how it had taken her so long to end things.

“And that’s why you need to put yourself out there this weekend. Just have some fun. You’ve been miserable for too long.”

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“Yeah,” Kate said, reaching for her cocktail and taking a sip, the refreshing tang of citrus hitting her tongue.

As the afternoon shifted into evening, Kate was nicely buzzed, and she felt relaxed for the first time in a very long time. She’d gone back to her room and swapped her bikini for white shorts and a navy tank top, touching up her makeup before returning to the pool area that had shifted from daytime lounging to night time clubbing. The music was louder, the beat pulsing through the speakers, and only a few women were in the pool now with most of the crowd hanging around the bar and makeshift dance floor.

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting the pool area in shades of orange and pink. Kate scanned the crowd in search of Lexi, and she found her dancing with the bartender from earlier who must have finished her shift.

Kate smiled to herself, happy for Lexi, and a little envious that she could just put herself out there like that. Kate needed to tap into that energy quickly or she’d be back in hotel room early, too afraid to mingle with gorgeous strangers.

The main bar that was beside the DJ’s booth was packed, overflowing onto the dance floor, and Kate wasn’t tipsy enough to brave that scene. She wouldn’t mind getting another drink before she even thought about dancing. She went back inside the hotel. Maybe that bar would be quieter.

The thumping beat of the music outside faded as she entered the lobby and found the bar. There were a few women sitting at some of the high top tables but most of the stools at the bar were free. Kate slid onto one of them and asked the bartender to

make whatever her favorite cocktail was.

“That’s adventurous,” a woman beside her said before she caught the bartender’s attention and ordered a drink.

Kate glanced to her left and blinked as her eyes focused on the striking woman who was standing just inches away. She swallowed, willing her brain to catchup and say something. “I’m easing myself into this weekend,” Kate said, a smile coming to her lips. “Trying to put myself out there. And getting adventurous with my drink choices felt like an easy win.”

Kate took in her luxurious dark brown hair, streaked with copper highlights, cascading over her shoulders in waves. She was probably in her early forties, and if Kate had to describe her ideal woman in terms of looks alone, she was the realization of those fantasies.

She wore khaki chinos and a black tank top that hugged her upper body, showing off her toned arms. She’d gone for comfortable yet stylish, and Kate was really glad that she’d decided to come inside.

“Are you nervous?” the woman asked.

Kate turned to meet her eyes. “Let’s just say it’s been a while since I’ve been single. And my best friend is out there jumping right in even though she’s just out of a long term relationship too. I’m not nearly as brave as her it seems.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

The bartender returned with their drinks. A glass of red wine for the beautiful stranger standing beside her and a classic mojito for Kate.

“Cheers,” Kate said, lightly clinking her glass against hers before taking a sip, the mint flavor refreshingly cool on her tongue.

“Cheers,” the woman echoed.

“So, you’re just out of a relationship too?”

“Well,” the woman sighed. “Not technically. Emotionally yes. I’ve decided to file for divorce, but I am still married. So... I know what you mean in the sense that this is my first time being anywhere like this in a very long time.”

Kate nodded. “I’m Kate, by the way.”

“Hollis.”

Kate met Hollis’s eyes again, noticing how dark her blue eyes were. They were a stunning mix of navy and gray, like a stormy ocean, and she found it difficult to look away. “Are you here on your own?”

“Yes.” Hollis took a sip of wine, and Kate’s eyes lingered on her long, slender fingers and her short, manicured nails.

“Now, that’s brave.” Kate took another drink, willing herself to keep it together and not let her nerves get the better of her.

“Do you think?” Hollis asked with a smile as she turned to face her, a lock of hair falling across her eye. “I think it might be a little crazy. No one knows I’m here. My friends don’t even know I’m gay.”

Kate couldn’t keep her eyebrow from arching. So, she was married to a man then. She was still processing that information when Hollis continued.

“Yeah. I’m about to throw a bomb into the middle of my life, but I feel surprisingly good about it. I came here on a whim. I got a phone call yesterday about a last minute cancelation, and here I am.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. My story’s not nearly as life changing, but I did just move back to California after spending the last five years in New York City with my ex. So, I think we should both be drinking to fresh starts,” Kate said, lifting her glass, holding Hollis’s gaze.

“That I can drink to.” Hollis gently bumped her wine glass against Kate’s cocktail. “Do you want to go outside? I just came in to get a drink without the wait.”

“Yeah.” Kate slid off her stool, hardly believing that this was how her first night here was starting. “I’d love to.”

They exited the bar with their drinks and stepped out into the warm night air. The music from the pool area carried over the huge outdoor area, pulsing softly in the background. Kate felt a flutter of nervous excitement in her stomach as they walked towards the back, to one of the empty outdoor sofas.

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“I haven’t felt this old in a long time,” Hollis said as she sat down on the couch, “But I’d much rather sit somewhere we can talk than be shouting over the music up by the bar.”

“I completely agree.” Kate flashed her a smile as she sat down, leaving a little space between them, but probably sitting closer than she should have considering they’d just met a few moments ago.

A light breeze rustled through the palm trees enclosing the area, casting shadows over the pool and dance floor.

“Will your friend be looking for you?” Hollis asked as she looked out at the crowded bar area.

“Lexi?” Kate asked with a laugh. “Definitely not. She’s been infatuated with one of the bartenders all afternoon and the last time I saw her she was out dancing with her, so I doubt she’ll come looking for me. She knows I won’t get into too much trouble.”

“You won’t?”

Kate’s breath caught in her throat. The delivery had been innocent enough, but the intensity in Hollis’s eyes? Kate would be an idiot not to read into it, but sitting beside this effortlessly confident woman, it didn’t take long for the doubts to start creeping in. How could someone like Hollis be interested in her? Just like Kate had felt the need to have one more drink before she put herself out there and got anywhere near the dance floor, Hollis was probably doing the very same thing. Enjoying a drink with someone safe, someone who wasn’t the slightest bit intimidating, before she ventured

out to find someone closer in age who was just as stylish as she was.

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Hollis sipped her wine, internally cursing herself for coming on too strong, too fast. She was so out of her depth here this weekend. In all of her daydreaming about what her life might look like when she finally let herself be who she was meant to be, she'd forgotten to think about what this part might look like. What it would be like to approach a woman at a bar? Although she never would have imagined someone as young as Kate. She'd just intended to get a drink and leave, but she'd been intrigued by Kate, and then she was asking her to join her out here without putting too much thought into it.

Maybe Hollis could do with putting more thought into her words now, because she was pretty sure she'd lost Kate. Scared her off completely with that simple, somewhat suggestive comment.

Hollis met Kate's gaze, her expression unreadable for a moment before a faint smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "Maybe trouble isn't always such a bad thing," Kate mused, her voice low and tinged with a hint of mischief. "I think I might be tired of playing it safe."

Hollis returned her smile before she took another drink. She was shockingly inexperienced at all this. She married Gary twenty years ago. She'd just turned twenty-four, and back then, it never crossed her mind that the reason she didn't feel a physical attraction towards someone she loved spending time with could be because she was gay.

But over the past decade, it had become clear to her that there was nothing wrong with her, despite what Gary had always implied. She shouldn't go see a therapist because she never wanted to sleep with him. She didn't need to unlock some

childhood trauma that she was unaware of because she could never get off when they did have sex.

And that was what had taken her so long to get to this point, to be ready to finally file for divorce, to put herself out there.

“Tell me about New York,” Hollis said after a moment, getting away from her own thoughts. Maybe Kate was right. This was brave, coming here on her own like this. “Do you miss it?”

Kate exhaled softly. “I miss the city. I loved my time there. But the rest of it? I’m so glad that part of my life is behind me.”

“What’s the rest of it?” Hollis asked. “If you don’t mind me asking,” she added as she studied Kate, watching her angle her body towards Hollis on the couch and tuck a lock of her blond hair behind her ear.

“No. Not at all. Well, I worked like crazy to be able to afford to live in the city, so my day-to-day life was a bit hectic, but then when I got home... I don’t know. I don’t know how I ended up staying with my ex for the last five years. It’s been so long since we were good together, maybe just that first year, that I can barely remember those times.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Hollis offered. “I’m trying not to be anyway, and I’m twenty years into a marriage that was doomed from the start. You were young. Maybe in love. How were you to know that it wouldn’t work out?”

“You’re not bi?”

Hollis shook her head. “No. And I’ve been living with regrets of different kinds for just about every one of those twenty years, so... It could be worse.” She hadn’t meant

to bring down the mood, but the words just flowed out of her, like she was talking to someone she'd known for years rather than just a few minutes.

"And now you're here," Kate said, holding her gaze. "Ready to start over."

"Yes. So ready," Hollis said with a soft laugh as she lifted her glass to her lips and took another drink, the smooth Merlot going down so easily.

"What about you? Where's home? Will you stay in the same area when you're officially divorced?"

Hollis ran her fingers through her hair as she crossed one leg over the other, angling her body more towards Kate. "Los Angeles, and I imagine I'll stay semi-local. I'll be downsizing. That's for sure."

"What part?"

"Pasadena."

"I'm in Glendale."

"We're practically neighbors," Hollis said with a smile despite the fact that she'd come to this weekend with zero expectations of meeting someone who she might continue to see when she went back to her normal life. For one, she was going to be going through all the potential messiness of a divorce, and having an affair while doing so wasn't an option. Plus, Hollis was trying to be realistic. She knew she had years and years of pent up desires and emotions ready to spill out, and that's why she'd chosen this weekend rather than signing up for a dating site while trying to hide her identity. Nothing about this weekend could be serious. This was about her exploring her own wants and needs for once in her life, and it had nothing to do with her life in Los Angeles.

Perhaps Kate was thinking the same thing because she didn't dwell on the subject of them living within a short drive of one another. "And what about you?" Kate asked after she finished her mojito. "Have you been seeing women all along? I'm not judging, by the way. I'm just curious."

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“As in, do I have experience with women?”

Kate nodded.

“None,” Hollis said softly. She didn’t hesitate telling Kate the truth. Part of her was embarrassed. Part of her was relieved, because saying it out loud meant that if things progressed with Kate tonight, and it was a massive ‘if,’ then at least Kate would be aware, and she could temper her expectations accordingly.

Although, a part of Hollis wondered if she was in bed with another woman, would she actually be naturally good at it, because for once she could just act without filtering her thoughts or calculating every move, trying to do the expected thing. She would be acting on impulse, and the thought both thrilled and terrified her.

“When was the last time you kissed another woman?” Kate asked, her voice gentle, without judgement.

This time Hollis had to look away, certain she was blushing. That question was harder to answer. The fact that she’d never once been in a position where she felt like she could act on her attraction to another woman was astonishing.

Hollis had imagined what it would be like, how soft another woman’s lips might be, how electric the chemistry could be, but they had always been fantasies. Not once had she ever been kissed by a woman.

“I’m sorry if?—”

Hollis shook her head. “No. No it’s fine. It’s just kind of hitting me how far off track my life has gotten. To answer your question,” Hollis said with a sigh, “Never.” She forced herself to look at Kate, to gauge her reaction, sure that she was going to scare this woman off with such an admission, although that would probably be for the best. Hollis almost didn’t even want to know how old Kate was. Early thirties at best? Late twenties at worst? Was she really going to let her first experience with another woman be with someone at least fifteen years younger than her? It was madness.

“Hey,” Kate said, reaching out over the short space between them and placing her hand over Hollis’s, giving it a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay. I’m not going to try and pretend that I can relate, but the fact that you’re here, that you came to something like this on your own,” Kate said, her eyes surveying the dozens of women by the bar and the pool, “Is amazing. I know I’d never be able to do that. And I think you should give yourself some credit for that. For taking a chance.”

Hollis glanced down at Kate’s hand over hers, trying to ignore the way that simple touch set off a tingling sensation that chased up her bare arm. She took a drink to distract herself and finished what was left of her wine. She left the empty glass on the table beside the couch, Kate’s hand still over hers. “Thank you for saying that. But I think I might have used up all of that bravery on coming here,” she said with a hint of a smile.

Kate shifted her hand, and Hollis was sure that she was about to withdraw it completely, but she casually turned Hollis’s over. Kate’s fingers lingered, tracing a lazy pattern over her palm before delicately sliding her hand over Hollis’s, interlacing their fingers.

Hollis felt that smooth move everywhere, and in that moment she realized that she might have entirely underestimated what it would be like to be with another woman. These simple touches were awakening feelings inside her, igniting synapses that had long been dormant.

Kate lifted her head to meet Hollis's eyes. "I don't think you've used it all up," she said softly.

"No?" Hollis searched Kate's eyes. She knew she wasn't drunk, but she felt so light, so drawn to Kate, almost intoxicatingly so, that Hollis was questioning her judgement. She'd already regretted so much in her life. Was she really going to put a stop to whatever this was just because Kate was so much younger than her?

"I think," Kate started, bringing her free hand up to Hollis's face to brush a lock of hair behind her ear, her fingers grazing Hollis's cheek before she let her hand fall, "That if you wanted to, you could seduce any woman you wanted."

Hollis smiled, the nervous energy running through her ebbed and flowed as this conversation continued. One minute, Hollis was tempted to find an excuse to leave, to offer to go get them drinks, and the next, she was hanging on Kate's every word. "You think so?"

"I know it," Kate said, her lips sliding into an easy smile.

"What if I wanted to seduce you?" Hollis asked, the words tumbling out of her mouth before she had a chance to catch them. Her heart pounded in her chest, her words hanging in the air between them.

"Then I'd say that you're doing a pretty good job," Kate said, her voice low as her gaze dropped to Hollis's lips before returning to her eyes.

Hollis swallowed. Isn't this why she'd put herself on the waitlist for this weekend? She searched Kate's eyes as leaned in, closing the space between them, until she let her eyes flutter shut, her hand resting on Kate's bare thigh. A tiny whimper escaped Kate's lips at the contact, sending a wave of desire through Hollis, giving her the confidence to brush her lips over Kate's.

A shiver chased up Hollis's spine. Kate's lips were so soft, and when Kate's warm hand came up to her cheek, Hollis tilted her head to give her greater access, parting her lips. Hollis's hand inched higher, her fingers brushing the cuff of Kate's shorts as they deepened the kiss, Kate's skin warm and smooth beneath her fingertips.

Kate's hand slid out of Hollis's, landing on her neck while Hollis's hand left Kate's thigh, moving over her hip instead as the space between them disappeared.

Hollis lost herself in Kate, in her addictive lips, in her sweet perfume. The sound of the music faded into the background, and all Hollis could hear was Kate's soft moan as she pressed her body into Hollis's. And when Kate's tongue skimmed over hers? Hollis knew that if nothing else happened this weekend, she was already going home a changed woman. Whatever doubts she had about filing for divorce and having to start over were gone. This was worth it. This was so worth it.

Hollis kissed Kate back with a greater intensity, aware that they were still out in public but thankfully tucked away from most of the guests' view, but it was hard to think about anything other than Kate's lips on hers. Hollis was dizzy with desire, with want, and no matter how sensible she wanted to be, it felt like spending the rest of the night with Kate was inevitable.

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Kate weaved her way through the crowd of women gathered around the pool and beside the DJ's booth, trying to get to Lexi who was waiting at the bar.

"Hey," Kate said with a smile, tapping her on the shoulder.

"Hi." The two of them were grinning like complete idiots. "You just can't stay away from older women, can you?" Lexi teased

Kate shook her head, still smiling. “Apparently not. How’s your night going?”

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“Already unforgettable,” Lexi said, pulling her into a hug. “I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. I just wanted to check on you and say goodnight.”

Lexi arched an eyebrow. “I’m even happier for you than I already was. Maybe I’ll see you at breakfast?”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow,” Kate said, giving her best friend’s arm a squeeze as she made her way back to the hotel lobby, her heart already beating a little faster.

None of this felt real. When Hollis had stood up, Kate thought that was going to be it. That Hollis was either regretting the fact that she’d kissed her or that she was drawing a line that she wasn’t willing to cross on her first night here. Both would be understandable. Hollis had seemed calm, but she must be at least a little overwhelmed.

But Hollis had said that she was going to go back to her room with a bottle of wine and to join her, that she just needed a minute to freshen up.

‘Room five seventeen.’

Whatever was going through Hollis’s mind, she still appeared confident.

Kate stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the fifth floor. When she met Hollis at the bar earlier, she never could have guessed that all of this was new to her. And that Kate would be her first kiss?

And what a kiss it had been. She'd been uncharacteristically nervous, considering what Hollis had told her, but when their lips met, she lost herself in it. Kate leaned her head back against the cool, metal wall, closing her eyes as she relived that kiss. It had been slow at first. And the soft sigh that had left Hollis's lips? It made Kate ache for more.

And when they both gave in, when their tongues met, when the warmth of Hollis's hand on her thigh sent a shiver of desire through her, Kate was on fire.

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. Kate stepped out into the hallway, the nerves that had been fluttering in her stomach earlier were back, making her legs feel like jelly as she walked down the corridor until she reached Room 517.

She took a deep breath, trying to gather herself before she lifted her hand to knock softly on the door, her heart thumping in her chest. As she waited, she reminded herself that she shouldn't be nervous. Not really. Hollis must be. Kate needed to be the one to make sure that Hollis was comfortable with whatever happened between them.

Part of her thought she was getting worked up over nothing. They could just end up talking for the rest of the night and hopefully spend some more time kissing. That might be it, and that would be perfectly fine with her.

But another part of her tried to imagine what this must be like for Hollis. Years. Decades of unfulfilled desires.

If that was Kate, she would be jumping on this situation and the woman sitting across from her. Without a doubt.

"Fuck," Kate muttered as she heard movement on the other side of the door.

In the fifteen minutes since Hollis had left Kate, she'd ordered a bottle of wine at the bar, second guessing even that simple choice. Should she order a drink for Kate? Another mojito? Did she even like them? There was always the minibar in the room.

She'd carried the bottle of Merlot and two glasses into the elevator, more doubts flooding her mind as she got off on her floor and made the short walk to her room. She wondered if she should get changed as she looked down at her chinos before surveying her suite. Thankfully, both her bedroom and living area were tidy, her bed still made. If she did get changed into something nicer, would that make Kate feel uncomfortable in her shorts and a tank top?

Hollis thought about how her eyes had drifted over Kate and those shorts when she'd entered the bar right behind her. They fit her perfectly. And her navy tank top? Hollis hadn't known where to look. From her tanned arms to her neck to the dip of the fabric that revealed a hint of cleavage.

Hollis didn't need to get changed. She was overthinking this. She left the bottle of wine and two glasses on the coffee table in front of the gray couch in the living area and pulled out her bluetooth speaker from her suitcase. She found a spot for it in the corner of the living area and put on a smooth jazz playlist, turning down the volume until it was at a subtle background level.

Hollis leaned against the back of the couch, her mind drifting to that kiss. She still didn't know how it had happened. She'd surprised herself.

What if I wanted to seduce you?

And then she was leaning in, kissing Kate softly. Even thinking about it now sent a wave of desire through her. The feeling of Kate's hand on her cheek, keeping them

close, had only urged her on, and Hollis had let her hand move up further, running into the cuff of Kate's shorts.

She still couldn't really believe that it had happened.

A knock at the door took her away from her thoughts, sending a surge of adrenaline through her body. She paused in front of the full-length mirror and took a deep breath as she ran a hand through her hair. As she reached for the door handle, there was an underlying excitement mixing with her nerves. She had no idea how tonight would unfold, but it was a good kind of uncertainty.

When she opened the door, Kate was standing there. "Hi," she said with a smile.

"Hi," Hollis said, swallowing down her nerves as she smiled back at her. There was no way Kate was in her thirties, looking at her now. There was no point deluding herself, but at the same time, Hollis reminded herself that it didn't really matter. This wasn't the start of a relationship. "Come in." Hollis held the door open for her, and she caught the familiar scent of Kate's perfume as she entered the room. "I wasn't sure if you were okay with wine. I should have asked, but there's a fridge full of drinks too."

"Wine is perfect," Kate said as Hollis let the door fall closed behind her. "Wow. This is nothing like my room."

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“I got lucky with the cancellation, I guess. A suite was all they had.” Hollis took another deep breath as she followed Kate into the living area, and she was glad that she thought to put on some music. The jazz was relaxing but also romantic, without being too much. “Will I pour you a glass?” Hollis asked as she sat down and reached for the bottle.

“Please.” Kate took a seat beside her, leaving the same amount of space between them as she had downstairs, and already Hollis couldn’t stop herself from thinking about kissing this woman again.

Hollis poured out two glasses and handed Kate one. “I’m glad you came up.”

“Thanks.” Kate’s fingertips lightly brushed against hers as she took the glass. “Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“I don’t know,” Hollis said with a tiny sigh. “It was always a possibility. To be completely honest, I’ve been second guessing myself a lot this evening. Even what to order at the bar.” She pressed her lips together. “Can you tell I’m nervous?”

“Would it help if I said I was too?” Kate asked with a smile tugging at her lips.

“No.” Hollis laughed softly. “What have you got to be nervous about?” She took a sip of wine, completely perplexed by Kate’s words.

Kate sucked in a breath. “Are you being serious?”

“Yes.” Hollis arched an eyebrow as she studied Kate.

“You’re absolutely stunning, Hollis. Of course, I’m nervous.”

Hollis knew she was blushing, but it had been a long time since someone had complimented her so directly, someone she desperately wanted to know better, someone who had kissed her so tenderly yet so passionately at the same time. “You really don’t need to be nervous,” Hollis said, still not quite believing that Kate had even said that. “You’re beautiful. And I’m still not really sure how I convinced you to come up here.”

Hollis hated that she was letting her doubts creep back in, but it did amaze her that Kate was here. There were so many young, attractive women downstairs, and yet, Kate was here. With her.

Kate was smiling at her. “You didn’t convince me. I wanted to come up here.” She held Hollis’s gaze. “From the moment I saw you in the bar, I was captivated.” Kate searched her eyes. “I’m the one who’s surprised to be here. I’m so glad you asked me, because I don’t think I would have had the courage to.”

Hollis once again felt a shiver run through her. She took another sip of wine, her heart skipping at the idea that this gorgeous woman had been just as interested in her as Hollis had been in Kate.

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Kate brought her glass of red wine to her lips and took a slow sip, feeling herself start to relax. It turned out that they were both nervous, and now that it was out there, in the open, Kate felt a whole lot better about it. She couldn’t be sure how tonight was going to go, but just knowing that they could be honest with one another was such a relief.

“I meant to ask you,” Kate said as she leaned forward to put her glass on the coffee

table, “How was your first kiss?”

Hollis’s smile spread, the lines at the corners of her eyes fanning out. Her eyes were almost sparkling. “You know, I’m not really sure.”

Kate was glad she wasn’t in the middle of sipping her wine, because she might have spit it out. She wasn’t sure? But then Hollis’s smile was back with a hint of mischief this time.

“I think I might need to refresh my memory,” Hollis said before she took another drink.

“Then it wouldn’t be your first kiss anymore,” Kate teased.

“Are you really going to stop me?” Hollis asked as she set her glass down beside Kate’s.

“No.” Kate knew she had a smirk on her face as she shook her head. She definitely wasn’t.

Hollis leaned in, her hand slipping underneath Kate’s hair, her palm warm against the base of her neck as she parted her lips against Kate’s. When Hollis’s lips met hers, Kate sighed as a warmth spread through her, reaching her fingertips with a light, tingling sensation. What was it about this woman? Kissing her just set Kate’s body on fire.

A chill chased up Kate’s spine as she moved closer, her hand on Hollis’s neck, her thumb lazily stroking her jawline. Kate let Hollis have control of this kiss. As much as she wanted to deepen it, she let Hollis set the pace.

Hollis moaned softly as Kate’s other hand rested on her hip, their tongues meeting in

a slow dance, and for the second time tonight, time fell away. Kate was so lost in the slow exploration of Hollis's lips that she had no idea how much time had passed.

Kate had to shove down any thoughts about how she'd never had this kind of chemistry with someone, how she'd never experienced a first or second kiss like this. There was a perfect balance of want and respect and just letting the moment be without thinking ahead to what it meant or where this would lead them.

Kate broke the kiss, her forehead resting against Hollis's for a moment before she pulled back fully, letting her hand fall to Hollis's leg. Kate met her eyes as they fluttered open, her cheeks slightly flushed. "Well? Did that refresh your memory?"

Hollis was already leaning in. "Not quite."

Kate smiled into the kiss, but the playful energy was gone in a second when Hollis threaded her fingers through Kate's hair, kissing her with a new intensity. Kate moaned into the kiss, clutching at Hollis's tank top when their tongues met again. This was the first sign of Hollis letting herself lose control, and Kate wanted that for her so badly.

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She didn't know how old Hollis was, but forty was probably a safe bet, and Kate couldn't fathom reaching that kind of age without kissing another woman. She was determined to make this a night that Hollis would always remember.

6

Hollis pulled away, her heart racing as she slid her fingers out of Kate's hair, and she could feel her cheeks heating up. She could safely say that none of her fantasies about kissing another woman had prepared her for that.

"I'm still waiting for a verdict," Kate said with a lopsided smile as she ran her hand through her hair.

Hollis let out a happy sigh as she reached for her wine glass. "I honestly don't have the words."

Kate's hand was back on her leg, just above her knee, and Hollis could feel the warmth of her touch through her chinos. "Are we at least talking about good words?"

Hollis laughed softly. "Yes. Definitely." She took a sip of wine, her mind still trying to process what had just happened. "Life-altering?"

"That good?" Kate asked with a smile.

"Yes." Hollis didn't return her smile. She was too lost in Kate's caramel brown eyes, and she knew that Kate could never understand how true those words were. Hollis would leave this weekend a changed woman. It was too dramatic to elaborate on, but

it was exactly how she felt.

“You’re being serious, aren’t you?” Kate asked before she lifted her glass to her lips and took a drink.

Hollis nodded. “Yes.”

Kate left her glass down on the coffee table and stood up. She held out her hand, her voice low. “Dance with me?”

Kate’s voice sent a shiver through her, and Hollis put down her own glass. She picked up her phone, turning up the volume on the jazz music that had quietly surrounded them. Sliding her hand into Kate’s, she let herself be pulled up. Kate left her flip-flops behind, and Hollis slid her feet out of her sandals, sinking into the cream carpet.

She swallowed down the lump in her throat as they moved into the open area behind the couch, and Kate’s hand slid from hers, trailing lightly across her back before coming to rest in the middle of Hollis’s back. She held out her other hand, and Hollis put her palm in hers, draping her right arm over Kate’s shoulder, her fingertips sliding under Kate’s hair.

“I’ve always wanted to dance with someone like this,” Kate murmured, her breath warm on Hollis’s cheek as they moved closer.

“Me too,” Hollis whispered. None of this felt real. She closed her eyes as they swayed to the smooth jazz, and Kate’s perfume filled her senses. Never had Hollis been so aware of her body. Her heart was still beating a little too fast. Her arms felt light, her skin sensitive to every touch. And she was more turned on than she’d ever been in her life.

The feeling of Kate's body so close to hers, her warm hand on her back, her hair tickling Hollis's cheek, it was overwhelming, in the best possible way. And like an addict, Hollis craved more. So much more.

7

As they swayed to the music, Kate held Hollis close, their bodies nearly pressed together. She desperately wanted to let her hands roam, to end up on the couch beside them on top of one another, their clothes flying off, but for some reason, Kate had an overwhelming sense of duty here. And her own wants needed to take a backseat.

As attracted as Kate was to this woman, she was under no illusion. This was not the start of something. When Hollis was ready to date, it wouldn't be with someone like her. And yet, as they continued to dance, Kate struggled to keep herself from falling for this woman. She could keep her own desire in check, for the time being, but her feelings? That was going to be almost impossible.

Kate could feel the heat emanating from Hollis and being this close to her, especially after that last kiss, was intoxicating. She swallowed as Hollis's fingers slowly traced patterns along her shoulder and collarbone. It was as if Hollis wanted more but hesitated to push any further.

Kate pulled back enough to meet Hollis's eyes, but she found them focused lower, perhaps at her chest then definitely her lips, until she met Kate's gaze. The intensity in her eyes nearly floored her.

Kate's hand slid out of Hollis's, the other still in the middle of her back. She reached up to tuck a piece of Hollis's hair behind her ear, her hand cupping Hollis's cheek, her thumb grazing Hollis's soft skin. The song they'd been dancing to faded into the next, but they stood still.

When Hollis leaned into her touch, her eyes dropping to Kate's lips again, Kate's breath caught in her throat. She couldn't remember feeling this wanted, and it made her heart race.

"What are you thinking right now?" Kate asked in barely a whisper.

Hollis's eyes lifted, her pupils wide. The air between them was charged. "I'm trying to show some restraint," she murmured as she leaned in, parting her lips over Kate's, eliciting a soft moan, and Kate could feel herself swaying into Hollis as she deepened the kiss.

Kate gasped into the kiss as Hollis's fingers trailed over collarbone, down the center of her tank top, between her breasts and over her stomach before disappearing beneath the fabric. The feeling of Hollis's fingers brushing over her lower abdomen had the muscles beneath her skin jumping.

Kate panted as Hollis broke the kiss. "Why?" She swallowed as Hollis's hand slid higher on her stomach before gliding over her ribs and settling at her lower back. "Why would you want to show restraint?" she barely managed to ask, her eyes searching Hollis's.

Hollis dipped her head, placing open kisses along Kate's shoulder and neck, and Kate was struggling to stay upright with every touch. "I'm afraid of what I'd be like," Hollis whispered, her breath hot against Kate's neck as she kissed her way up to Kate's earlobe before tilting her head to capture Kate's lips in a searing kiss. "If I let go."

"Fuck," Kate gasped into the kiss, Hollis's words lighting a fire within her as Kate deepened the kiss, her tongue searching out Hollis's.

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Images of what Hollis might be worried about filled her mind. Would Hollis push her back onto the bed and take charge? Would she get on her knees before that and pull her shorts and underwear down, overcome with the desire to pleasure a woman with her tongue? Would they even get as far as the bed?

If Kate already wasn't so tightly wound, so ready to give into this, she was hanging on the edge now. She'd never felt this consumed with want, and she finally gave into the need to touch Hollis. Her hands were on Hollis's hips, and Kate slid one hand underneath her top, a smile coming to her lips as they continued to kiss when she felt Hollis press her body against Kate's, leaning into her touch.

Kate's other hand ran over Hollis's arm, over her shoulder and into her thick, luxurious hair. She couldn't imagine what Hollis was thinking right now. For her, who had known she was into women since she was a teenager, who'd been kissing and sleeping with women for years, this was a revelation. What must Hollis be feeling right now?

With a soft sigh, Hollis pulled back, her eyes fluttering open. They needed to catch their breath, but neither of them was willing to separate, their hands still caressing, exploring, their noses still touching, and Hollis's fingers dancing across her lower back had her aching for more, wondering what those fingers would do to her.

The music was still playing in the background, but Kate wasn't registering any of the words. All of her brain power was focused on staying upright, on everything about Hollis, and then they were kissing again, and Kate couldn't even say who had made that move. They were already so lost in each other.

Kate's hand ran over the soft skin along Hollis's ribs, and then she was palming Hollis's breast through her bra. Hollis sighed into the kiss before she tilted her head back, breaking the kiss, her breath coming out in pants as Kate's thumb found her hardened nipple beneath the thin fabric and swiped her thumb across it.

Kate dipped her head, kissing Hollis's neck, her other hand wrapping around Hollis's waist and holding her close as she trailed kisses along her skin, feeling Hollis's pulse jump beneath her lips.

"What are you doing to me?" Hollis asked, her voice husky as she cupped Kate's cheek and guided their lips back together.

As their lips met again, Kate felt Hollis's tongue sweep into her mouth, and Kate couldn't hold back her moan as she felt Hollis's warm fingers splayed over her lower back, her nails gently raking over her skin as she slid her hand around to Kate's hip.

"I had no idea," Hollis murmured between kisses. "No idea."

"That it would be like this?" Kate guessed, pulling back to meet her gaze.

"Yes." Hollis visibly swallowed. "I knew I was missing out, but..." Her voice trailed off as she searched Kate's eyes. "I've never felt this out of control."

"I've got you." Kate locked her eyes onto Hollis. "Lose control. Let go. Don't even think about showing any kind of restraint." She wanted Hollis to act on her instincts. She wanted Hollis to be herself with her.

Hollis's hands were on the hem of her navy tank top, and Kate took a step back as she lifted her arms over her head. Hollis tossed her top onto the couch beside them without looking. Her eyes were very focused on something else, and Kate loved the hunger in them as Hollis openly checked her out, her gaze lingering on her stomach

then her chest, her fingers tracing a line across the edge of Kate's bra, sending a shiver through her.

"You're beautiful," Hollis said, and Kate couldn't miss the reverence in her voice, her eyes on the swell of Kate's breasts now, following her fingers as they skated over to her other breast. "I want you," she said as she lifted her eyes to meet Kate's. "So fucking badly."

Kate inhaled a sharp breath, and she couldn't say whether it was from Hollis's touch or her words. She was the one using restraint now, letting Hollis take as much time as she wanted to.

8

Hollis had taken off Kate's tank top without even realizing what she was doing, and now she couldn't take her eyes off Kate's gorgeous body. She let her fingers draw a line over the edge of Kate's bra, along the curve of her breast, her own lips parting as she struggled to keep her breathing even.

Every part of Hollis's body ached with desire, and it should have been overwhelming, but right now, Hollis could think of little else besides removing Kate's bra. Hollis held Kate's gaze as she reached both hands behind Kate's back and unhooked her bra with trembling fingers. Kate shifted her shoulders and gravity did most of the work, but Hollis eased the fabric away, throwing it in the direction of the couch, her hands moving of their own accord to cup Kate's breasts in her hands, her thumbs bringing Kate's semi hard nipples to a taught peak with just one or two swipes.

The soft moan that left Kate's mouth awoke something within her. This entirely new feeling of wanting to pleasure someone more than she cared about her own release, although Hollis knew it wouldn't take much to send her spiraling into ecstasy.

How could that even be? After years of not caring the slightest about sex, not even enough to regularly take care of herself, now she was so on edge that Hollis couldn't be sure that Kate wouldn't make her come from just kissing her.

Hollis brought her head down to press a soft kiss against Kate's breast, moving around her nipple as Kate arched into her, until finally Hollis couldn't wait any longer, swirling her tongue around Kate's nipple before taking it fully into her mouth and darting her tongue over it, causing Kate to sway into her, a ragged breath escaping her lips, hot against Hollis's ear.

"Oh my god," Kate gasped, her hand on Hollis's shoulder, the other on her hip.

Hollis couldn't remember the last time she felt this confident, this sure of herself, especially considering that she had no right to be. She kissed her way over Kate's soft skin to tease her other nipple, her fingertips taking over for her tongue, teasing her other breast, rolling Kate's nipple between her thumb and index finger before pressing her palm against her full breast, massaging her while her tongue went to work on the other side.

Kate's grip on Hollis tightened. Then Kate's hand threaded through her hair, and the sensation of her nails scraping her scalp was dizzying.

Hollis trailed kisses along Kate's jaw and down her neck, while Kate's hand gripped her hair gently, urging her closer until their lips met again in a fiery kiss that left them both breathless.

Hollis lost herself in yet another heart-stopping kiss, and she had no idea how she would survive when they got into bed together. Right now, she could safely say that she'd never been this turned on, and she just couldn't imagine what would happen to her when Kate's legs were tangled with hers, when Kate's hands started to explore her body. The thought alone had her body tingling with anticipation, knowing that

she wouldn't have long to wait to find out.

Hollis's hands slid up Kate's side and around to her back as they kissed, and she couldn't resist letting them drop further, groping Kate's ass through her shorts, and that had Kate breaking their kiss, a ragged moan on her lips.

"I can't stay standing," Kate said with a sigh. "You're driving me crazy."

Hollis met Kate's eyes, and for the first time she understood what it meant for the air to crackle with electricity. The intensity of this moment was palpable. "Maybe we should move into the bedroom," Hollis said, her voice a little rough, but she swallowed down her nerves, knowing she wanted this.

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“Are you sure?” Kate whispered, her hand tenderly brushing a strand of hair away from Hollis’s face. “I don’t want you to rush into this if you’re not ready. We still have the rest of the weekend.”

Hollis felt a smile tugging at her lips. Judging by Kate’s moans and the fact that she was half naked, she must be more than ready to find a bed, but she was willing to call it off if Hollis wasn’t sure. “I’ve never been more sure of anything. But thank you. For checking in with me.” Hollis leaned into Kate’s touch, her hand still on her cheek, and kissed her again, softer this time, with more tenderness.

“Come on,” Hollis whispered as she pulled away, letting her hand slide down Kate’s shoulder, interlacing their fingers as she led them to the king-sized bed in the other room.

With each step, Hollis could feel her heart beating faster, but it was the best kind of nervousness, and she was still in awe of how this evening had unfolded. She couldn’t deny the uncontrollable pull she felt towards Kate. Everything about this was exhilarating, and Hollis had no idea what to expect once they fell into bed together, but if the way she was feeling right now was any indication, this night was going to be nothing short of explosive.

9

Kate followed Hollis into the dimly lit bedroom, her heart thudding in her chest. Just a floor lamp in the corner of the room cast a warm glow on the perfectly made bed. She’d let Hollis take the lead up to this point, but Kate was ready to switch that. When they reached the foot of the bed, Kate gently brushed Hollis’s hair away from

her face and leaned in for a passionate kiss that was meant to show Hollis just how much she wanted her.

Hollis moaned as Kate's other hand slipped under her black tank top, her short nails skating over her abdomen before they ran along the waistband of her chinos. Kate popped open the button with one hand, and Hollis gasped into the kiss.

Using both hands now, Kate slowly tugged Hollis's chinos down, and she reluctantly broke the kiss to slide them all the way to the ground. Hollis stepped out of them, and Kate took her time standing up, kissing her way up along Hollis's inner thigh. Hollis staggered as Kate placed the softest kiss along her black panties, just grazing Hollis's clit before getting to her feet.

"Can I take this off?" Kate asked, her fingers on the hem of Hollis's tank top.

"Please." Hollis visibly swallowed, her eyes dark with desire.

Kate slowly pulled the fabric over Hollis's head, revealing a lacy black bra. Kate let the top fall to the ground, her fingers delicately running along the edge of the bra, biting her lip as she stared at the swell of Hollis's breasts.

Hollis's hands found their way to Kate's hips, her fingers skimming along where the fabric of her white shorts met her bare stomach. She held Kate's gaze as she unbuttoned them and slid the zipper down one tooth at a time. Kate inhaled a shaky breath. She actually couldn't believe how much restraint she was showing right now. She wanted to grab Hollis's hand and guide it between her legs, aching for some friction, but more than that, she wanted Hollis to enjoy this, and judging by the intensity in Hollis's gaze as she drank her in, Hollis was definitely enjoying herself.

Hollis gently eased Kate's shorts down her hips, leaving her panties on, and Kate stepped out of them, her heart beating faster, waiting to see what Hollis would do

while wrestling with her own need to take charge.

“You’re so beautiful,” Hollis whispered as she dragged her eyes over her once more before leaning in, her hand on Kate’s neck as she tilted her head and kissed her.

Kate moaned into the kiss, her hands sliding up the back of Hollis’s thighs before groping her ass through her underwear. Hollis groaned, and Kate shifted so that her thigh was between Hollis’s legs. Hollis immediately pressed her center against her, and Kate let out a soft whimper at the contact.

Kate pulled back, her grip on Hollis’s ass light before she slid her hands higher, her fingers dancing across the fabric of Hollis’s bra.

Hollis simply nodded, her cheeks slightly flushed, and Kate couldn’t stop her hands from trembling as she unhooked Hollis’s bra and slid the straps off her shoulders.

Kate forgot to breathe as she stared at Hollis’s perfect breasts. Kate leaned in, kissing the incredibly soft skin, purposely avoiding her nipple while her other hand returned to Hollis’s ass, her fingers splayed across her cheek as Kate inched closer, her tongue darting across Hollis’s nipple before retreating again.

Hollis arched into her, moaning as she slid a hand through Kate’s hair, keeping her close. “Please,” she whimpered. “You’re driving me crazy.”

Kate didn’t want to make Hollis wait any longer. There would be time for that later. Now, she took a deep breath as she lightly circled Hollis’s nipple, feeling it harden as she captured it between her lips and swirled her tongue around her now very hard nipple.

“Oh god,” Hollis moaned, swaying into her as her grip on Kate’s hair tightened. Hollis’s breath hitched as Kate gently bit down before kissing her way over to

Hollis's other breast, and Kate savored the control she had in this moment.

Kate's fingers danced delicately over Hollis's skin, tracing teasing circles around her sensitive nipple before cupping her breast fully. Kate gently caressed her skin, contrasting with the quick flicks of her tongue on Hollis's other nipple. Kate could feel the tension building in Hollis's body, and she hoped that the combination of gentle touches and intense flicks would drive her wild.

"Oh Kate," Hollis panted, her hips moving restlessly against Kate's thigh.

Kate's hand slid away from Hollis's ass, trailing her fingers down Hollis's thigh before coming up again to trace the line of Hollis's panties along her inner thigh.

Kate replaced her leg with her hand, cupping Hollis through her underwear. Hollis let out a long moan as she arched into Kate's touch, her hips bucking forward.

"Please Kate," Hollis gasped. "I can't take much more. I need you."

Goosebumps erupted over Kate's skin as she registered those words. She eased her hand away from Hollis's center and slid her hand over Hollis's stomach and up to her breast as she leaned in and kissed her again.

"I want you so much," Kate whispered between kisses, her eyelids fluttering open as she met Hollis's gaze. "You have no idea how much." She leaned in again, capturing Hollis's lips in a hungry kiss as she let her hands roam down to rest on Hollis's hips, guiding her back towards the bed. "Lie down," she commanded softly.

Hollis sat on the edge of the bed and pushed herself back towards the middle of it. Kate followed, her fingers hooking under Hollis's panties. She slid them down her legs, taking her time, meeting Hollis's eyes as she lifted her head off the bed, her eyes blazing with desire. "Take them off."

Kate tried to hide her smile as she slowly slid off her own panties. She could get used to this side of Hollis. She climbed onto the bed, kissing her way up Hollis's body, stopping to tease her nipples before kissing her way up Hollis's neck.

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Hollis moaned, pulling her down into a heated kiss, her fingers tangled in Kate's hair. Kate sighed, the feeling of their bare breasts meeting as they kissed sending pulses of desire through her.

Kate broke the kiss, looking down at Hollis with her hair fanned out against the sheets. "No restraint, right?"

Hollis's lips slid into an easy smile. "I don't think I could even if I wanted to," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kate smiled before lowering her lips to Hollis's chest, kissing her way back down Hollis's body, placing open kisses over her stomach while her fingers toyed with Hollis's nipples. Kate was so wet, and Hollis's sighs were only bringing her closer to the edge. Kate shifted her body further down the bed, easing Hollis's thighs apart as she kissed her lower abdomen.

Kate's eyes traveled over Hollis's gorgeous body as she got comfortable between her legs, her palm sliding along Hollis's thigh, and Kate could see how ready Hollis was for her. Kate breathed in her scent as she kissed her inner thigh, inching closer to her center. Hollis squirmed beneath her, her hands already gripping the sheets in anticipation.

With one slow flick of Kate's tongue, Hollis was moaning, her hips lifting off the bed, and Kate smiled as she took her time, circling her clit with the lightest touch. Kate slipped her hands underneath Hollis's ass to lift her higher, bringing her even closer as she took Hollis's clit in her mouth.

“Oh fuck,” Hollis gasped, her hand in Kate’s hair, clutching it as her hips rocked against Kate’s mouth. “Fuck.”

Kate increased the pressure, alternating her strokes, and seconds later, Hollis cried out, her hips bucking wildly against Kate’s mouth as she completely came undone. Hollis’s thighs clenched around Kate’s head as she rode out her orgasm.

“Kate,” Hollis’s said, her voice hoarse as her legs fell away, her arms limp at her side as she caught her breath.

“Hm?” Kate wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Never had she felt that much satisfaction from making someone else come.

“That was...” Hollis’s voice trailed off.

Kate smiled as she slowly kissed her way up Hollis’s body, her palm sliding along Hollis’s ribs as she caught her breath, filling her hand with Hollis’s full breast.

Hollis was still catching her breath as Kate’s lips met hers in a tender kiss, her heart pounding in her chest. Kate ran her fingers through Hollis’s hair as she deepened the kiss, her thigh slipping between Hollis’s legs, and it wasn’t long before both of them were gently rocking their hips.

“That was incredible,” Hollis said, barely breaking the kiss. “I’ve never been so...”

Kate’s tongue slid over Hollis’s, and they both moaned into the kiss. Hollis’s hands were on Kate’s ass, and she smoothly rolled them over, switching their positions.

Hollis pushed herself up, her fingers tracing the line of Kate’s collarbone, her thumb brushing against the sensitive skin of Kate’s throat. “I have so many things I want to do to you. I don’t know where to start.”

Kate smiled up at her as she pulled her down into a deep kiss, her fingers running through Hollis's hair, loving how soft it was, loving the moan that left Hollis's mouth as Kate's grip tightened. Kate managed to get back on top, much to Hollis's surprise, and Kate found Hollis's hands, pinning them above her head.

"I wasn't done with you yet," Kate said, her eyes raking over Hollis's gorgeous body.

Hollis's breath hitched as Kate's hand trailed down her body. Kate straddled Hollis's leg while her fingertips traced a line up Hollis's inner thigh. Kate gently parted Hollis's folds with her fingertips, teasing her clit with steady circles before dipping them lower and entering her with two fingers.

Hollis threw her head back, a low moan on her lips. "Oh god."

Kate found her rhythm with short, quick strokes, feeling Hollis's walls tighten around her. Kate slid her other hand away from Hollis's, over her shoulder to palm her breast, her thumb grazing her hard nipple.

Hollis arched into her touch, her hips rolling to meet Kate's thrusts. Hollis's hand found Kate's hip, gripping her, the other fisting the sheets, her eyes tightly shut, her breathing ragged.

Kate leaned down, kissing Hollis's jaw, her palm now pressed against the sheets to hold herself up. Hollis kissed her back fully, sliding her tongue into her mouth. The ache between Kate's legs was building to a new level. She was so turned on, but this was so much more important. Hollis was close.

Seconds later, Hollis broke the kiss, and her eyes slammed shut as she cried out, her grip on Kate's hip so tight, her other hand clutching Kate's ass, grinding back against Kate's hand as she came.

Kate watched as Hollis's body shuddered beneath her, and she was certain that she'd never witnessed anything as sexy as Hollis coming undone. Kate eased her fingers out as she leaned down to kiss Hollis's shoulder, then her neck, before sitting up and bringing her glistening fingers to her mouth.

"Kate," Hollis sighed, watching her with hungry eyes. "I don't know what you just did to me," she said, a smile tugging at her lips. "I..." She shook her head as she covered her eyes with her hands.

"Hey." Kate got comfortable beside her, tracing her fingertips lightly over her stomach. "You okay?"

"I'm so much more than okay." Hollis turned to look at her. She closed the small space between them, brushing her lips over Kate's in a slow, tender kiss. "I just need a second," she said with a soft laugh as she pulled away, placing a hand on her chest as if to still the beating of her heart. "I can't feel half of my body right now."

Kate laughed as she moved onto her back, throwing her arm over her head. "I've never seen anything as sexy as that."

Hollis chuckled beside her. "I find that hard to believe."

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“Well believe it. I’m being very serious.” Kate met her gaze. “You’re stunning and watching you let go like that?” She shook her head. “I don’t even have the words.”

Hollis’s eyes fluttered shut for a second before she reached up to brush Kate’s hair away from her eyes. “I want to make you feel like that.”

“I’m all yours,” Kate said, her heart thumping in her chest as Hollis pushed herself off the bed and climbed on top of her.

10

Hollis’s eyes fluttered shut. With Kate’s hands on her breasts, she hadn’t gotten very far in her exploration. Her hips rocked slowly against Kate’s thigh. “You have to stop,” Hollis said as her breath caught when Kate rolled her nipple between her fingertips. “I can’t think with your hands on me like that.” Hollis opened her eyes as she slid out of Kate’s reach.

Hollis had no idea how she could be so close to the edge again. Her body was on fire, and she desperately wanted to make Kate feel as good as she just had. She hadn’t had time to think when Kate’s mouth was on her or when her fingers slid inside her. Now? Hollis didn’t know where to start. She wanted to taste Kate, but she also wanted to be inside her. She swept her eyes over Kate’s perfect body, her hand following her eyes, trailing over her soft curves.

A part of her believed this day would never happen, and she swallowed down the emotion of this moment. Kate had already made her see stars, but somehow this moment was more powerful. Kate’s eyes locked onto hers as Hollis got comfortable

on top of her, her fingers gliding up her leg and over her stomach. She dipped her head to tease Kate's nipple with her tongue, and Hollis glanced up to Kate's eyes close as she threw her head back, her hips lifting as Hollis's tongue swirled around her nipple.

Hollis brought her hand to Kate's sex, a moan on her lips when she discovered just how wet Kate was.

Kate lifted her head to meet her eyes. "I'm so ready for you," she murmured. "Please don't make me wait."

Hollis slid her fingers through Kate's slick heat, lightly pressing her fingertips against Kate's clit, drawing small, tight circles before moving lower and slipping inside with ease.

"Ohh," Kate moaned, her fingers digging into Hollis's thigh.

Hollis gasped at the pain, but it set off another jolt of desire somewhere deep inside her, and she moved her fingers in and out, urged on by Kate's pleading with her not to stop.

"More," Kate panted. "I'm so close."

Hollis added another finger, and before she knew it, Kate was pulling her down, kissing her hard as her hips rocked back against Hollis's hand.

Kate had to break the kiss, her fingers sliding through Hollis's hair as she buried her face in Hollis's neck, her breathing coming in short gasps as orgasm took over. Hollis held her fingers inside, pushing her palm against Kate's clit, and Kate's grinded her hips back against her before collapsing back against the bed.

“Oh my god, Hollis.” Kate’s eyes were still closed, her hand on her forehead.

Hollis slowly withdrew her fingers, and she kissed her way down Kate’s body, tasting the salt on her skin. She placed a palm on Kate’s thigh, and Kate’s legs fell open. Hollis smiled to herself, knowing exactly what it felt to be that exhausted. She inhaled Kate’s musky scent as she slid her tongue through her folds and up to circle her clit. As Kate’s breaths came in frantic gasps and her fingers raked through Hollis’s hair, she had to assume she wasn’t doing a bad job considering this was all new to her. It wasn’t long before Kate had two hands in her hair, holding her close as her body shook, Hollis’s name on her lips as she came.

“God, Hollis,” Kate said with what sounded like a happy sigh. “I can’t believe you haven’t done that before. I never would have known. That was amazing.”

Hollis smiled as she kissed her way back up Kate’s body. Her heart felt like it might burst. Pride for her, for finally doing something that she’d fantasized about for so long. For having someone as beautiful and experienced as Kate compliment her like that. “I’m glad and relieved if I’m being completely honest,” she said as she sat up on her knees.

“I mean it. You were incredible.” Kate’s hands found her waist. “Come up here.” Kate’s legs were still spread, and she stopped Hollis when their hips lined up. She shifted a little, and then with her hands still on Hollis, Kate urged her to slowly roll her hips.

A low moan escaped Hollis’s lips, the sensation overwhelming, and she let herself fall forward, covering Kate’s body with her own as they started to move their hips a little faster.

“Oh fuck,” Hollis gasped, her eyes falling closed as her hand glided over Kate’s cheek, drawing her in for a deep kiss, their tongues swirling, and Hollis would have

said that she couldn't possibly come any harder than she had a few minutes ago, but she was mistaken. This orgasm came out of nowhere, her hips speeding up without her even thinking about it, and Kate came seconds behind her, her fingers digging into her lower back, adding more pressure.

Hollis had to break the kiss. She struggled to catch her breath, and just as she was about to roll off Kate, her grip on Hollis's back eased, Kate's warm hands sliding up her back. Their faces were only inches apart, noses brushing against each other as they shared soft, lingering kisses.

Hollis pulled back, gently pushing a stray lock of hair away from Kate's face. She gazed into Kate's eyes, seeing her own desired reflected back at her.

"Are you okay?" Kate asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hollis's lips slid into a smile. "I'm more than okay." She leaned down, kissing Kate again, a shiver running through her as Kate's fingertips danced lazily over her back. Hollis had no idea how she was going to go back to her normal life on Sunday. Everything had changed. But she couldn't think about that now.

Now, she was going to every moment she had with Kate, because she had a feeling this weekend was going to go by far too quickly for her liking.

11

Kate had never truly understood the meaning of the word delirious until she was wandering down the hallway towards her own hotel room at ten o'clock the next morning. This was no walk of shame, but a part of her knew that she had to be careful. There was no reason for her to think that Hollis would want to see her again after this weekend. Maybe she would, but it wasn't something that Kate could get hung up on.

But it was impossible to ignore the way she was feeling right now, like she was walking on air, a smile constantly at the ready, and that was before she even really thought about what had happened last night. She'd never been anyone's first before, but she would have thought that a night like that would be full of awkward moments or maybe some stopping and starting while they got to know one another's bodies.

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Except that wasn't at all what last night had been like. It was every single cliché that she could think of. It was romantic. It was magical. It was exhilarating. Surreal. Kate couldn't keep the smile off her face as she slid her hand into her pocket to get her room key.

"Good morning."

Kate's hand flew to her chest as she stumbled backwards. Lexi had come out of her room next door just as Kate went to use her keycard, scaring the shit out of her.

"Morning," Kate said, running a hand through her hair, trying to calm her racing heart and fix her potentially messy hair. "How was last night?"

Lexi flashed a smug grin. "Still going." She let the door close quietly behind her with a soft click and stood next to Kate in the hallway. "She's fast asleep now though, so I'm going to get some breakfast and bring something back for her." Lexi's eyes narrowed as she took in Kate properly, and then they grew wide as she registered that Kate was still in yesterday's clothes. "And I don't think I have to ask you about your night."

Kate bit her lip. "I have no words."

"Oh my god." Lexi's mouth fell open. "Come with me and let's go find coffee and a bagel or something." She was reaching for Kate's arm and dragging her down the hall before she could say otherwise. "Tell me everything."

"I don't know. It's... She's..."

“What’s her name?”

“Hollis.” Kate swallowed. “She’s going through a divorce. With a guy.”

“Okay.”

“And I was her first time,” Kate said slowly, almost truly processing it for the first time now that she was saying it out loud.

Lexi stopped walking. “What?”

Kate nodded. “Yeah.”

“Holy shit.”

The last few steps to the elevator were in silence. “It was kind of mind-blowing though,” Kate said with a sigh as she pressed the button for the elevator doors.

“Holy fucking shit.” They stepped into the empty elevator and got out when they reached the lobby. “She was hot, Kate. Like probably out of your league hot.”

“Hey.” She hit Lexi on the arm.

“You know what I mean. It’s not you so much as it is her. Well, I only saw her from a distance, but she had that vibe about her, you know? Sophisticated. Stylish.”

“Yeah. She is. And I’m...” Kate blew out a breath as they went outside, and she had to take her sunglasses out of her bag and slide them on. “I’m trying not to overthink this. I’m not a one-night stand kind of person, but at the same time, I know what you mean. I honestly couldn’t see her calling me next week to go out on a date.”

“Where’s she from?”

“I don’t know if she’s from there or not, but she lives in Pasadena.”

“What??” Lexi’s jaw dropped for the second time that morning. “Are you kidding? My girl’s from San Diego. Not impossible but not ideal either.”

“Is it the start of something?” Kate asked with a smile as they found an empty table and a waiter came over to take their order.

“I don’t know.” Lexi’s lips curved into a smile. “I’d like to think so. Two hours isn’t that big of a deal but Pasadena? Are you kidding? She’s an Uber away.”

“I know,” Kate said before she pressed her lips together. “I know.”

“Don’t be so quick to rule it out.” Lexi shrugged. “She’s going to be a free woman soon, and if she had half as much fun as you seemed to have had last night, why wouldn’t she call you?”

Kate’s stomach dropped. “I have to get her number.”

“Kate,” Lexi said with a tilt of her head. “Come on. You shouldn’t have left this morning without it.”

“I know. I know. I’m not used to this.” Kate bit the inside of her cheek. The weekend was barely getting started though. Surely, she’d be spending more time with Hollis before they went their separate ways.

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Their waiter returned with their drinks, and Kate took a long, refreshing sip of orange juice, knowing she had to rehydrate after last night.

God, last night. She still hadn't had a chance to relive any of it, but when Lexi got up to find the restrooms a few minutes later, Kate couldn't stop her mind from drifting back to just a few hours ago, to the way Hollis had made her come again and again.

The way Hollis had been was actually remarkable. There had been zero signs of self-doubt. Maybe she was feeling it, but she certainly hadn't shown it. If Kate hadn't known that this was Hollis's first time, she would have never guessed.

Even just the way that Hollis had kissed her. Before anything had happened. Kate closed her eyes for a second, her skin tingling as she thought about the way they'd danced together and how their lips had fit together so perfectly.

Every muscle in her body ached right now, but Kate wanted more. She wondered how soon was too soon to knock on Hollis's door or should she just hope that she'd bump into her down here in the afternoon?

Also, she needed to sleep. That realization hit her like an unexpected wave crashing into her, her eyelids suddenly heavy. She'd get some breakfast, and then fall into bed for a few hours.

12

Hollis's room was dark except for a sliver of light creeping in through the curtains. She blinked as she tried to read the clock beside her bed. 4:22. It took Hollis a second

to register whether that was four o'clock in the morning or in the evening, until she stretched her hands over her head and felt every muscle in her body aching.

It was the middle of the day, because Hollis had been awake at four in the morning last night. She closed her eyes again, a smile coming to her lips. Had that really happened? If her body wasn't so sore right now, she'd nearly think that she'd dreamt the entire night up, because it was not at all what she thought would happen this weekend.

Yes, the whole point of being here was to meet someone, but even when she'd wheeled her suitcase up to her room yesterday afternoon, she still hadn't been sure that she actually would. Maybe she would have found the courage to introduce herself to someone and maybe they would have shared a kiss, but that was the extent of her hopes for this weekend.

Hollis pushed the sheets back and swung her legs out of the bed, her bare feet hitting the plush carpet as she padded into the bathroom and took the robe down from the hook on the back of the door. Before she slid it on though she caught the red lines etched in the skin over her lower back, and Hollis's knees went weak, remembering exactly when that had happened.

She put on the robe and brushed her teeth, hardly recognizing the woman staring back at her. Her hair was disheveled. Her cheeks had a warm glow to them, and for the first time in a very long time, she felt truly happy. Light almost.

Hollis padded back into the bedroom and ordered room service, her stomach grumbling as she placed the order for a caesar salad, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since this time yesterday, and who knows how many calories she'd burnt last night.

Hollis had a quick shower, knowing she wanted to be out and dressed before her food

arrived, but the entire time, she couldn't stop herself from replaying as much as she could remember from last night. She hated that she couldn't remember every single detail, but last night had been a blur. She couldn't blame the alcohol. She hadn't had much. She didn't know what it was, but it had been a whirlwind of a night.

Even when she thought about the way they'd danced together, how already at that point their chemistry had been insane. Hollis turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, drying herself off and noticing a few more marks around her thighs, probably from Kate's fingers gripping her as she'd come.

As Hollis slipped into a pair of navy shorts and pulled on a white tank top, she tried to count how many times she'd come last night. Six at least. Maybe seven? She hadn't even known that it was possible. A flash of Kate's body moving against hers, her hips rocking against her thigh as they kissed came into her mind, and Hollis remembered joining her, her body already so spent yet so turned on at that point. Maybe it was more like eight.

A knock at the door startled her out of her thoughts, and she opened the door, more than ready to eat something.

As she sat down at the table and ate, she was only a few bites in when she dropped her fork against the bowl with a clatter. How had she not gotten Kate's number?

A wave of panic swept through her before she forced herself to think logically. It was Saturday evening. Everyone that was here was probably staying until at least Sunday morning if not until Monday. If Hollis went downstairs and spent her time moving between the lobby, the bar, and the pool area, she was bound to see Kate.

By the time she was done eating, another anxious thought popped into her head. What if Kate was ready to move on to someone else tonight? Wasn't that what these wild weekends away were like? What if Hollis went out there now and saw her at the bar

by the pool kissing another woman.

Kate had every right to. Last night was last night, and as world altering as it had been for Hollis, it might have been just another night for Kate.

“It couldn’t have been though,” she said to herself as she went into the bathroom to put on her makeup.

Hollis wasn’t exactly in a position to start a relationship, because she was technically still in one no matter how loveless it was. What could she even offer Kate beyond this weekend? And that was if Kate was even interested?

There was also the problem of Kate’s age, which Hollis still didn’t know, and maybe that was for the best. There were at last fifteen years between them, and although it hadn’t come up last night, it was still something to consider.

“Shit,” Hollis said as she put on her mascara and stood back from the mirror to get a better look.

This was not the problem she thought she’d have leaving this weekend. She thought that she’d regret not acting on her attraction if she met someone who intrigued her. She never would have guessed that she’d be thinking about how she could see that woman again after this weekend because they’d spent the entire night in each other’s arms.

But she wasn’t leaving. Not yet. She still had the rest of today, and then she was due to check out on Sunday morning. That was when she’d worry about what comes next.

It was almost six o’clock by the time Kate got back downstairs. She’d spent the day

sleeping and ordered room service for dinner. After a long shower, she was starting to feel like herself again. She put on her favorite pair of army green shorts and a black tank top, but there was a nervous energy coursing through her as she left her hotel room.

Would she see Hollis downstairs? And what would her reaction be? Would they pick up where they left off? What if Hollis regretted last night?

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Kate wandered over to the bar just off the lobby and ordered a glass of Chardonnay. That had to be the least likely option. They'd left on good terms, and whatever was going on in Hollis's life right now, Kate just couldn't see her regretting the night they'd spent together.

She slid onto a bar stool while she waited for her drink, running a hand through her hair, trying not to be nervous. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen. There was no point trying to guess what that would be.

"Is this seat taken?" The familiar voice came from behind her a few moments later, and a shiver chased up Kate's spine.

A wave of desire came over her just at the sound of Hollis's voice. She'd heard so many different versions of it, all of them already eliciting a multitude of reactions from her body, and when she turned to meet Hollis's eyes, she couldn't have prepared herself for the physical reaction she would have. Her heart was fluttering while her stomach did somersaults.

"No," Kate managed with a smile coming to her lips as she took Hollis in. Her hair had a few more waves in it, falling across her shoulders. Her white tank top showed off her tan and toned arms, and her navy shorts cut off in the middle of her thighs. Kate resisted the urge to reach out and run her hand over her smooth skin.

"I think this is exactly where we met yesterday," Hollis said, flashing her a warm smile before she turned to catch the bartender's attention. "Are you okay for a drink?"

Kate nodded. "It's on the way." She wet her lips, willing herself to keep it together, because she felt the full force of what Lexi had said to her this morning, that Hollis was so far out of her league.

But she was here, sitting beside her. That had to count for something.

"What did you get up to today?" Hollis asked, giving Kate her attention again, and Kate struggled not to get lost in her gray blue eyes.

"I slept." Kate's lips slid into an easy smile. "I'm only just up."

"Sorry. That wasn't a great question since that's exactly how I spent my day, although I've been down here for about an hour. Hoping to bump into you," she added after a second.

Kate held her gaze, and Hollis reached across the few inches between them to rest her hand above Kate's knee. That simple touch brought every memory from last night to the front of her mind. She had to be blushing as she remembered the way Hollis's warm palm had slid up her thigh as she gently parted Kate's legs. The bartender returned with their drinks, breaking the spell that Kate seemed to have fallen under, and then Hollis's hand was gone. Kate took a much needed drink.

"I was hoping to see you too," Kate said, wondering where all of her confidence had gone.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course." Kate took another sip, the crisp white wine so refreshing.

"How old are you?"

Kate looked away for a second, almost surprised that this hadn't come up last night. "I'm twenty-six."

Hollis's expression was unreadable as she reached for her glass of red wine.

Kate's heart beat faster, waiting for her to say something. She didn't want to outright ask Hollis what her age was, but maybe she'd have to.

Hollis gently placed her glass on the bar, before sliding her fingers through her hair and propping her elbow up on the bar, her gaze settling on Kate. "I was hoping you'd say at least thirty," she said with a slow smile.

Kate's eyes searched hers. There were so many things she wanted to ask. Was Hollis curious about her age because she was wondering if this would work in real life? Could Hollis see them together despite their age difference?

"I'm forty-four," Hollis said, her eyes still locked on Kate. "In case you were wondering."

"I wasn't, but what I am wondering is why you wanted to know."

"As in, if I'm thinking beyond this weekend?"

Kate took a sip of wine before putting her glass down. "I don't know. You tell me." She managed to keep her voice steady while her heart was hammering in her chest.

"My life is extremely complicated right now," Hollis said, finally breaking their eye contact as she sat up straight, her fingers sliding out of her hair. "I'm not sure what I have to offer you, but I also can't ignore the way I felt last night. Maybe, it wasn't as intense for you—"

“It was. Not for the same reasons maybe, but it definitely was.”

Hollis was looking at her with such a sultry gaze. At what point could Kate suggest they go back upstairs? Because she was having trouble thinking of anything but getting Hollis out of those clothes.

Hollis exhaled softly. “I’m a realist. I like to set the right expectations, and I like to be in control.”

“I know,” Kate interrupted with a smirk on her lips.

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Hollis's expression completely changed, the seriousness slipping away as she laughed softly. "As I was saying... I like to be realistic. I don't know if it's because I've been running my own business for so long and being the one in control of the outcomes, but I just don't want you to think that next weekend would be like this one. Because it wouldn't."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an interior designer." Hollis held her gaze. "Do you know what I'm trying to say? I would only love for this to be the start of something, but I can't honestly say that it could be. Even if I want it to."

Kate swallowed down the lump that had formed suddenly in her throat. Hollis's words didn't surprise her, but they were still hitting her to the core. "No, I know. You were upfront with me yesterday. You told me you were getting a divorce. But I'd just like to say that I would be willing to see where this might go, however unrealistic. I don't think our age difference had any effect on how our night went."

"Hmm, well it wouldn't if you spend the night in bed," Hollis said, her eyes nearly sparkling, her smile mesmerizing.

"I know, but if you were single right now, would you let our age difference stop you from wanting to see me again?" Kate asked. She knew she had no right to be this invested in Hollis, not after one night together, but she also knew for a fact that she'd never experienced anything even remotely as sexy, as intoxicating as their connection last night.

Hollis studied her. “Eighteen years is a lot.” She inhaled a sharp breath. “But I feel like you’re getting the short end of the stick here.”

Kate couldn’t stop her eyebrows from shooting up. “You’re kidding,” she said with a laugh. “Please tell me you’re kidding.” She reached for her glass and took a drink.

“No. I’m not. But to answer your question.” Hollis bit her lip. “I feel like I should say that it would let it stop me. That’s the sensible thing to say. And maybe last night wouldn’t have happened if I’d known.”

“Do you regret it? Last night?” Kate didn’t think her heart could beat any faster, but it had gone up another gear in the last few seconds.

“No. Not at all. I’m glad that I didn’t know, and I’m so glad that we had last night,” Hollis said, reaching for Kate’s hand as she set her glass back on the bar.

Kate’s breath caught in her throat as Hollis slid her hand over Kate’s palm, playing with her fingers as she interlaced them. What was it about Hollis? Touches and looks that might have intrigued her coming from someone else were driving her crazy when they came from Hollis.

“But now that I do know,” Hollis said, looking up from their hands, “I don’t know. I have a feeling that I’m going to have a very hard time going back to my normal life after this. I’m not sure how I’m going to forget about you, because I know that I should. And I think you’ve changed me in a way that you’ll never understand. I know that sounds incredibly dramatic, but no matter what happens, I will always remember last night and everything about you. How you made me feel. How you kept me grounded when I thought I was losing myself.”

In that moment, unselfishly, Kate just wanted Hollis to be happy, however that looked for her, and judging by the way this conversation was going, it wouldn’t

involve her. And Kate had to figure out a way to be okay with that. She'd come into this weekend with zero expectations, and she had to leave this hotel the very same way tomorrow afternoon.

"So," Hollis said with a sigh, "What I'm trying to say is that, honestly, I don't think I'd say no to you, if we met in Los Angeles next week or next month, but that's not possible. Not anytime soon anyway."

"No, I know," Kate said, glancing down at their hands. "I wasn't looking for anything. I know you've got a lot on your plate right now. I guess, I was just curious. If you could see us..." Kate let her voice trail off. She shouldn't have asked, and she might have ruined any chance of spending tonight in Hollis's room, because all of a sudden things had gotten very serious.

"I think I could," Hollis said with a smile slowly coming to her lips. "And that's a big deal for me. I still can't really believe that I'm here. Five years ago, I never would have dreamed of driving down here for the weekend. It just wouldn't have been something I could have done. I know I shouldn't be here. I could have waited another year, and maybe I should have. By then I'd be free to see whoever I wanted to without worrying about the consequences, but..." Hollis was smiling fully now. "Then we might not have met."

"Probably not." A warmth spread through Kate as she held her gaze, Hollis's words replaying in her head. How did Kate have it this bad? That hearing Hollis say that she thought she could see them together would have her feeling this energized, this happy. But it wasn't real. Not that Hollis was lying, but the part about them not really having a chance together because of Hollis's current circumstances wasn't going to change, and Kate needed to reel it in. "So we have tonight?"

"Hmm. We do. I'm leaving in the morning. I have a client meeting in the afternoon that I really wish I could change." Hollis slid her hand away from Kate's and reached

for her drink. “On the drive here, I would have said that I’d need to be very drunk to allow myself to let go like I did last night, for last night to even happen, but I’m so glad that I was only slightly tipsy.”

Hollis took a drink, and Kate couldn’t keep herself from staring, her eyes moving over Hollis’s neck, her toned arms, her fingers.

“And this is all I’m having tonight,” Hollis said as she met her eyes. “I want to remember every single detail.”

Kate’s lips slid into an easy smile. “Me too.” Her heart was thumping wildly against her chest, but it was more anticipation than nerves tonight. She finished her wine before sliding off her stool. “Will we go upstairs?”

“I’d love to,” Hollis said, reaching for her hand.

14

Hollis sat in her car, the engine humming softly as she waited for the gates to open. She pulled into her driveway, delighted to see it empty. She wasn’t ready to leave the weekend behind her just yet, and the longer she went without seeing and speaking to Dave, the longer she could keep the memories of the last two days alive in her mind, untarnished.

Hollis carried her suitcase inside, her handbag slung over her shoulder as she climbed the curved staircase up to the master bedroom. She left her suitcase in her walk-in closet to unpack later. She sunk down onto the bed, her shoulders and legs aching from the past two days, a constant reminder that what had transpired was real, not just a dream.

She opened her bag and pulled out the slip of hotel paper. Hollis stared at it, not

entirely sure what to do with Kate's number.

She'd been surprised when she'd woken up alone this morning, but she got it. Saying goodbye was never going to be easy, but she couldn't stop herself from wishing that she'd had a few more hours with Kate, that they'd been able to say goodbye properly.

She scoffed as she fell back against her smooth white sheets. Who was she kidding? How exactly would it have gone if she'd woken up with Kate in her bed, and they had to say goodbye, knowing that they wanted to see each other again and at the very same time that they couldn't.

Hollis couldn't have trusted herself not to let a tear slip down her cheek. She couldn't have trusted herself not to promise Kate that they would see each other again. Hollis probably would have done something stupid like give Kate her number.

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And then, at the very least, they would have spent the next few weeks texting if not eventually giving in to meet up somewhere.

It was a disaster waiting to happen. Hollis had to find a good lawyer and get this divorce in motion. She did feel a little guilty that she'd given Kate the impression that she was in the middle of a divorce rather than her finally feeling like she could do it, that she was ready to find a lawyer.

And if she stayed in touch with Kate, the next thing that would happen is that Kate would say that she'd wait for her.

It just couldn't happen like this. Hollis had to sort out of her life, and then, maybe, she could use Kate's number. How long would that take? A year? Maybe a little less? Would Kate have moved on by then?

Hollis exhaled loudly as she pushed herself up, folding the piece of paper in half and tucking it into one of the interior zippered pockets in her bag. She wanted to forget that she had Kate's number. At least for now.

Her eyes landed on the clock beside the bed. She had to get ready for her client meeting, and she needed to land her.

Hollis spent the drive back to Pasadena thinking about all of the things she needed to do from finding a solid lawyer to ramping up business. She wanted to stay busy to keep herself distracted, but she knew that she could do with stashing some extra money away to at the very least pay for the divorce and ideally to keep her afloat for a while. Things would probably be rocky for a few weeks if not a few months. She'd

need to find somewhere to live. She'd have court dates to attend she assumed, and she didn't want to be worrying about money. She didn't want anything to stand in her way when it came to putting her marriage behind her.

She slid out of her sandals and padded into the closet, pulling her favorite skirt and crisp white button-up blouse from their hangers. As she dressed for her meeting, her mind was calm and focused. In her twenty two years in this business, she'd discovered early on it wasn't always about giving the client what they said they wanted. It was about getting to the heart of the look, the feel that they wanted for their home and delivering it, even if it meant leaving out the particular style they'd asked for. And that's what made her good. Because she didn't always follow their exact requests, and she was able to get to the heart of their desired look and deliver it flawlessly.

Hollis slid on a pair of sleek black heels and spent sometime in the bathroom, touching up her makeup, feeling surprisingly energized despite the fact that she'd hardly slept this weekend.

But she knew it wouldn't last. She'd crash tonight, memories of the weekend giving way to tiredness, to her everyday life at work and at home, and with any luck, in a few days, maybe weeks, Hollis would be able to stop thinking about Kate and what might have been if she'd dealt with her problems sooner.

15

Kate had never known time to drag on so slowly like she had in the week after she'd snuck out of Hollis's hotel room. As soon as she got back to Lexi's apartment on Sunday, she threw herself into job hunting, knowing that she'd have to stay busy if she wanted to keep her mind off of Hollis and the fact that Kate might never see her again.

With each day that went by, Kate's heart continued to jump at the sound of a text coming in, hoping that this was it. Hollis had finally decided to use her number and say hi or that she was thinking of Kate or that she wanted to see her again. Something. Anything.

But it was Sunday again, and Kate never heard from her. She'd had her first shift at a sports bar yesterday, and she had a few job interviews lined up during the week, hoping to find a morning shift at a coffee shop. She had to save up some money as fast as possible, because even though she knew Lexi wouldn't kick her out, Kate couldn't sleep on her couch forever.

"Hey," Lexi said, coming to join her on that very couch. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Kate shook her head. "You know, just thinking about... Everything."

"It'll get easier." Lexi shifted to turn towards her. "You know what you said in the car on the way back last weekend, about going back to college to finish your degree?"

"Yeah."

"I think the deadline is soon. Like this week or maybe next week. If you're serious about doing your last year."

"Shit," Kate pulled her phone out of her pocket, hating that she'd even stopped to check the notifications for an unknown number. She searched for the college she'd already did three years at, also hating the fact that she'd left her education behind to go to New York on a whim. "Thanks, Lex. I have four days to get my shit together. Fuck, I was so caught up in trying to get a job."

"Hey, you're doing just fine. I'm not going to throw you out if that's what you're worried about. And you know Isabelle doesn't care. She's just happy her rent's gone

down. Stay as long as you need to.”

“I know. Thank you. I’m just trying to get my life together. I mean, I know I needed to, but the whole thing with Hollis just made it so clear. How could I ever expect someone like her, a business owner who’s in her forties to take me seriously when I’m a college drop out, sleeping on my best friend’s couch.”

“She hasn’t text has she?” Lexi asked with almost a wince, already knowing the answer.

“Nope.” It was a dull ache that had sat in the middle of her chest all week, because with each passing day, the chances of Hollis reaching out grew slimmer. And because of the way Kate had done things, she had no way of getting in touch with Hollis.

“If it’s meant to work out, it will.”

Kate blew out a breath. “I can’t believe I didn’t stay.”

“Yeah, but you said it yourself. What if Hollis flat out told you that she wasn’t going to give you her number because she didn’t want to see you again? Or maybe not something that harsh, but you know what I mean. That Hollis knew she wasn’t in a place where she could see you again, and therefore, ended things then and there, in her hotel room.”

“That might have been better. Knowing. Right now, I keep jumping when my phone lights up.”

“It’s only been a week. I’m not saying to wait around for her, but she is going through a divorce. Maybe, when it’s all finalized, she’ll get in touch.”

“God, I hope so.”

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“But no moping around. You’ve had a week of that, and don’t even try to deny it. You might not be complaining every second, but you’ve got that defeated look. Get enrolled. Get another job if you really want to. But don’t let this thing with Hollis take over your life.”

“You’re right.” Kate got up to slide her laptop out of her backpack and pull up the college’s website. “Do you still have your notes?”

Lexi laughed. “No. As soon as I got my degree, I chucked all that shit.”

Kate shook her head. “But you would have given it to me, right? If you had them?”

“At a price,” Lexi said with a grin, and Kate reached behind her for a pillow, whacking Lexi in the shoulder. “Hey,” she said, leaning back to stay out of reach. “Drinks Tuesday night. Me, you, and Izzy.”

Kate put the pillow between them. “I’m working.”

“You name the night then. We’re going out and celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?”

“You. Getting your shit together.”

Izzy’s voice drifted down the hall. “Count me in!”

Kate smiled. She had so much that she needed to change, but she knew how lucky she

was to still have Lexi in her life all these years later.

16

Not for the first time Hollis was thankful that her and her husband led relatively separate lives. She didn't need to come up with some kind of cover story for when she'd met with her lawyer twice in the last three weeks. She just left the house the very same way she would if she was meeting a client or a vendor or one of her design team.

She'd come right from her afternoon meeting with her lawyer and stepped into the cozy Italian restaurant, the aroma of garlic and rosemary filling her senses. She spotted her best friend, Jennifer, already seated at a corner booth and made her way over.

Jennifer smiled when she saw her and slid out of the booth, wrapping her arms around her in a long hug. Her strawberry blond hair fell just above her shoulders. "Is it done?"

"Yeah," Hollis said as she pulled away, still not quite believing it herself. "Thank you for recommending that firm," she said as they sat down across from one another. "Everything is somehow so efficient, yet they make you feel like this is the only case they're working on? I don't know how they do it, but they certainly made the whole process easier."

"Well, my divorce was easy in the sense that we both wanted it, and there was nothing to fight about. We both met new people and couldn't wait to end what had become more of a friendship than a marriage. What's Dave been like?"

"I haven't told him yet," Hollis said as a waiter approached their table, and they ordered a bottle of wine to share. "That's tonight's job," she said when they were

alone again.

“Oh shit. Well, you know you can call me, whenever. I mean it. I’m sure he’ll be surprised. Hell, I was surprised when you called. I had no idea you were so unhappy.”

Hollis’s heart skipped a beat. This was the moment where she had to say it. It wasn’t right keeping her best friend in the dark like this, and even for herself, she felt like she needed to say it out loud. “I wrote down ‘irreconcilable differences.’ But it’s more than me not being happy.”

Their waiter returned with their bottle of wine at the worst possible moment, and Hollis motioned for Jennifer to do the taste test. Hollis reached for the glass of water, gulping it, her hand shaking slightly as she put the glass down.

Jennifer nodded her approval after she’d had a sip, and the waiter poured out two glasses before taking their meal order. Hollis hadn’t even looked at the menu, but she got her favorite dish here, lobster ravioli.

“So, what was it?” Jennifer asked a few moments later.

Hollis’s throat was tight, and she didn’t know why this was such a big deal. She’d known Jennifer for close to twenty-years, but the words still struggled to come out. “I’ve known for a while now that um...” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “That I wasn’t happy, and that I never could be. I’m gay, Jen. I wish I’d known when I was in college, that just because I loved being around Dave didn’t mean that I loved him. And now, somehow, I’m forty-four, and I’ve let so much time go by.”

“Hey,” Jen said softly. “Thank you for telling me. And first of all, I’m shocked. I had no idea, but I’m so proud of you. I can’t even imagine how hard this all must have been.”

Hollis sighed as she reached for her wine glass and took a drink. A wave of relief washed over her. “It’s funny. The realization part wasn’t actually that hard. It was so gradual. Looking back, I don’t know how I didn’t see it sooner. The crushes I had on professors in college. The times that I probably flirted with potential clients without even realizing it. And the fact that I avoided sleeping Dave for all of our marriage is probably the most obvious sign.”

Something changed in Jen’s expression.

“What?” Hollis asked.

“No. I’m just wondering if Dave will be as blindsided as you think he might be. I mean, if you haven’t been sleeping together for what... A few years?”

“Try ten.”

“Do you think he’s having an affair?”

Hollis sucked in a breath. “No.” But the second she’d said it, she knew she had no reason to believe it was true. They hardly saw each other, especially these last few years. “Maybe,” Hollis said quietly before taking another sip of wine. “I’ve always been grateful for our independence. I’ve gone to conventions, taken on clients halfway across the country. And if he’s not at work, he’s also going to conventions, doing speaking gigs, and if he’s got any free time? He’s golfing.”

Jen’s eyes narrowed. “Or so he says. And I’m not trying to be cynical or make you rethink the grounds of your divorce, but you know guys are like. I would bet my house that there’s no way he’s been celibate.”

“If that’s true, and I think it very well could be, I’m not hurt so much as I’m disappointed in myself. I could’ve been here, having this dinner with you so many years ago, celebrating my impending divorce.”

“Don’t worry about that. You can’t go back. And I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. This is your night. We’re supposed to be celebrating.” Jen picked up her glass. “To fresh starts. You deserve it, Hollis.”

Hollis bit the inside of her cheek as she lifted her glass. Kate’s words echoed in her ear. ‘I think we should both be drinking to fresh starts.’ It had been almost a month since that weekend, and she didn’t think a single day had gone by where she hadn’t thought of Kate, wondering what she was doing, wanting to text her.

Hollis swallowed. “To fresh starts,” she said softly, clinking her glass against Jen’s.

The warm afternoon sun cast a golden hue over the old brick buildings as Kate and Lexi strolled around their former campus. Kate's eyes swept across the familiar structures and pathways, taking in every detail. Students lounged on the lush green grass, some reading books while others chattered animatedly with friends. Her eyes followed a squirrel as it scurried up a tree. The campus smelled of freshly cut grass, blooming flowers, and rich coffee from the nearby cafe.

It felt so strange to be back after all these years. Kate never should have left without finishing her final year, but in a few months, she'd be back, and this time next year, she'd have her degree.

"I can't believe it's been four years," Lexi said.

"I was just thinking the same thing. Although it's been five for me." Kate gazed at the library, remembering late nights spent cramming for exams, fueled by vending machine snacks and cheap coffee. She imagined herself walking up those same steps again, knowing that it would be different this time. She was so much more focused now than she'd been back then when she'd chosen to study psychology just because she had an interest in it. Now, she knew she wanted to get into social work. "I spent so much time in there."

A handsome man probably in his mid-forties came out of the library, his eyes locking onto Lexi. He was tall and well-built, dressed in a tailored white shirt tucked into his black pants.

"Lexi," he said with a friendly smile, a book tucked under his arm. "What a surprise. Are you coming back to do a post grad?"

"I'm thinking about it," Lexi said with a smile that Kate thought looked forced.

“Well, I hope you do. It’d be good to see you around campus again.” His eyes were fixated on Lexi, only stealing a brief glance in Kate’s direction.

Lexi gave him a wave before he continued on his way, and they kept moving in the opposite direction.

“I doubt any of my professors would remember me,” Kate said. “I sat at the back and kept to myself. This guy remembers your name four years later without hesitation.”

“Yeah, that guy’s Professor Clarke, and he’s probably still trying to figure out why I turned him down. I’m sure he doesn’t hear ‘no’ very often.”

“He hit on you? When you were his student?”

“Kate, don’t look so shocked. It happens all the time. Although, Professor Clarke was the most... Calculated about it. I had his last meeting of the day, so the building was quiet. We’d gone over the paper I’d turned in, and as I was leaving, he came around from behind his desk and shut the door, pushing me up against it.”

“What the fuck?” Kate asked, her feet slowing.

Lexi shrugged, her dark hair fluttering in the light breeze. “I ducked out of it and told him to stay the fuck away from me. He was probably just relieved that I never reported him, or else he forgot that I wasn’t interested. I don’t know why else he’d be so happy to see me after what happened.”

“Why didn’t you report him?” Kate asked as they started walking again.

“I was graduating in less than a month, and he as a reputation. Both as a creep and as a highly respected figure when it comes to teaching. He’s got like three books I think, and he gives talks around the country. I’m sure he’d have to do a lot more than try to

kiss me to get fired.”

“And he’s going to be one of my professors?”

“Definitely.”

“Great,” Kate said with a heavy sigh, already dreading having someone like him as a professor.

“Hey, just don’t be alone with him, and you’ll have nothing to worry about. The rest of my professors were amazing during my final year here, so I doubt much has changed since then.”

Kate made a mental note to check her schedule when it was released in a few months to see how many classes she had with Professor Clarke, hoping it was as few as possible.

Hollis could have spent all evening with Jennifer, but after dinner and dessert, Hollis hugged her goodbye. She couldn't delay going home any longer, and as she pulled up to the gated entrance, she noticed that it was already open. Parking behind Dave's sleek sports car, she stepped out of her own vehicle, leaving behind the file folder stuffed with important paperwork from her meeting with her lawyer. The last traces of the vibrant sunset she'd spent her drive home watching began to fade.

The front door opened, just as Hollis was about to reach for the handle. She stepped back. "Hi," Dave said, standing in front of her in black pants and a white button-down shirt, looking like he just got home from work.

She wasn't sure if he'd be home or not, but she had to have this conversation and the sooner, the better.

"Hi. I'm glad I caught you," Hollis said, trying to keep her voice steady. Her eyes fell on the suitcase just a few feet behind Dave. "Can we talk?"

"I've got an Uber coming in..." He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Four minutes."

Hollis exhaled slowly. "Okay. Business trip?"

"No. Golf. I'll be back late Sunday night. So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Look, there's no easy way to say this, and probably no right place to say this." She

paused, steeling herself for what she was about to say. “I want a divorce.”

He stared at her, his eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re serious?”

Hollis stared back, a mix of anger and disappointment washing over her. “Yes. Why would I joke about this? I met with my lawyer this afternoon, so yes, I’m serious. This is happening.”

“You know I’ll get half your business, right?” He said it smugly, with a smirk playing on his mouth.

“That’s what you’re thinking about right now? Dividing our assets? You don’t want to know why?” Hollis had her hands on her hips, wondering why she was getting so worked up over his reaction. She shouldn’t be surprised. She’d felt like nothing more than his trophy on more than one occasion over the years. She knew it looked good for him to have her on his arm at a charity dinner or work event.

“I gave up wondering what goes on in that head of yours a long time ago.”

The sound of a car approaching caused them both to turn, signaling the end of their conversation.

“That’s my ride to the airport,” Dave said, reaching behind him for his suitcase. “I guess I’ll need a lawyer too. We’ll talk about this when I get back.”

Hollis got out of the way as he wheeled his case to the car, and the driver got out to put it in the trunk. She watched him go, her jaw tight. She should be happy. He wasn’t going to fight this. But it was just another reminder of how badly she’d screwed up her life. He didn’t love her. Not anymore.

And she’d spent far too long trying to figure out how to love him.

Kate carried her iced coffee out onto the back deck, more than ready for her break. She put on her shades as she found a free picnic table and sat down. In the summer, she'd spent so many hours at this sports bar that even her boss joked she should just move in. But compared to her previous waitressing jobs in New York, this place was a breeze. Her manager was laid-back and fun, and the atmosphere was relaxed even on busy nights. Kate counted herself lucky to have this job, especially since it allowed her to continue working while pursuing her degree.

Kate sipped her iced coffee. Why did she ever leave California? Next week was Thanksgiving, and it was a sunny seventy-two degrees. She pulled out her phone to check what the weather was like in New York. Snow flurries. While she might miss the atmosphere of the city during the holidays, she did not miss the bitterly cold days and slushy streets.

When she started college, she had to give up her morning shifts at the coffee shop, but she knew she had to keep this job. She needed the money. Things had been oddly falling into place for her in the last few months. College was turning out to be fun, and just as Lexi had predicted, all of her professors were excellent. She just kept her distance from Professor Clarke. Even if Lexi hadn't told her what happened to her, Kate would have figured it out. Within the first month, she'd already seen him getting a little too close to a few female students, and Kate wanted nothing to do with him. She went to all his classes and turned in her papers, hoping to fly under the radar.

And before that, in June, just when Kate started looking for a room in someone else's apartment, Isabella announced that she was moving in with her girlfriend, so Kate took her room. The timing was perfect. Even though Lexi would never kick her out, two months on someone's couch was overstaying her welcome.

Every day was busy, but in a good way, and around October, Kate finally started to

feel like herself again. She'd had some low points in the summer when she realized that Hollis was never going to contact her. In May, she told herself it had only been a month. Hollis might have been busy with work, with lawyers. When two months had gone by, Kate was still quick to pick up her phone anytime it chimed, wishing an unknown number would appear on her screen. In July, when Lexi had gone to San Diego to meet up with the bartender from that weekend, Kate was alone on the 4th. She'd worked through the fireworks, stepping out onto the deck to watch them, but when she'd gotten home that night, exhausted and feeling more alone than she ever had, she'd caved to an idea that had been at the back of her mind for a few weeks at that point.

When she couldn't sleep, she reached for her phone, finally giving in and searching for an interior designer named Hollis in Pasadena. Not only was she lonely, but she was starting to forget what Hollis looked like, all of the images in her head from that night beginning to fade as the months went by. And there was Hollis's gorgeous face staring back at her. The first search result brought her to Hollis's website. Kate stared at the image of Hollis sitting elegantly in an arm chair with her legs crossed, her hair perfectly styled in waves. She radiated confidence. Hollis looked every bit the successful businesswoman in that photo, and Kate locked the screen, her heart racing.

Kate closed her eyes, blindly leaving her phone on the nightstand, tears threatening to fall. The whole thing was so frustrating. Her decision to leave that hotel room without Hollis's number still haunted Kate seven months later. It was ridiculous. It was irrational. Why had she been so sure that Hollis would get in touch with her? How had she been that arrogant?

And while things were better now, and that night had served as some sort of a turning point, here she was, spending her break thinking about Hollis. When would it end?

Hollis opened the file folder full of 8×10 photos, spreading them out across her glass coffee table for Jennifer to see. She'd been the one to suggest that Hollis hire a private investigator.

“You were right,” Hollis said as she sat down beside Jennifer. “One week in September. The last week in October,” she said pointing to the next four photos. “And just last week.” She slid those photos to the side to reveal another three, a series of shots with Dave's arm around a student's waist before they got in his car.

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“Fucking bastard,” Jennifer muttered as she shook her head.

When Hollis had made the call and asked for Dave to be followed for just a week, she hadn’t expected much, but at the same time she wasn’t wasting money to have him tailed for months. How wrong she’d been. In that first week, he’d been spotted with three young women.

“All students, too,” Hollis said with a sharp intake of breath.

“Unbelievable.” Jennifer sat back. “You should use this.”

“I don’t want to make this any uglier than it already is.”

“But he’s trying to take your business or half of it anyway.”

“Oh, I managed to solve that problem last week.”

“Yeah?”

Hollis nodded. “He thought I’d fight him for this house, since it is my dream home. I remodeled it exactly how I wanted it. He didn’t want to have a say in it, but I told him to keep the house if he left my business alone.”

Jen stared at her. “Hollis... This house is worth a fortune.”

“So is my business.”

“And he agreed?”

“Yes.”

Jennifer glanced at the pile of photos. “But if you used this...”

Hollis shook her head. “I want this over and done with.” As the weeks and months went by, Hollis itched to pick up her phone and text Kate, but she’d gone this long. She could make it another few weeks. Unless... She could reach out to Kate, and if things went wrong, if Dave somehow found out, at least Hollis had leverage with these photos.

“What are you thinking about?” Jennifer asked with a raised eyebrow.

“You know that spa weekend I had in April?”

“Yeah. I was pissed that you didn’t invite me,” Jen said with a laugh.

“Well, I would have if that’s what I was actually doing.” Hollis crossed one leg over the other. “I went to this lesbian weekend. Think Pride but at a hotel resort and just women.”

Both eyebrows shot up. “Hollis! I can’t believe you. You went on your own?”

“Yeah.”

Jen lunged forward, wrapping her arms around her in a warm hug. “I’m so proud of you.” She pulled back. “I can’t wait for you to be officially single, so you can go out there and meet someone.”

“I think I already have met someone,” Hollis said in just above a whisper.

“What?” Jennifer’s jaw dropped.

Hollis couldn’t keep the smile off her face as she told Jen about Kate. She’d tried so hard not to think about Kate, especially these last few months. It was November. She shouldn’t still be thinking about one weekend back in April. It didn’t make sense.

“Hollis, why haven’t you contacted her? I don’t get it.”

“Because of the divorce. Because it’s not fair to her. And I still don’t even know what chance we’d have out there in the real world. She’s eighteen years younger than me.”

“Yeah, you said that. Plenty of people make that kind of age difference work.”

“You haven’t even met her,” Hollis said with a smile tugging at her lips.

“I don’t need to. I haven’t seen your face light up like that in a long time. It’s usually reserved for a project you’re particularly proud of.”

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Hollis checked her watch. “Are you free tonight? I’ve got a reopening party to go to for that restaurant I’ve been working on.”

“Silver Tides?”

“Yeah. I need to be there around seven. Do you want to come with me?”

“Sure.”

Hollis had always kept a pretty busy schedule, but these last few months it had been wall to wall. She used to just make an appearance at events out of courtesy. She’d finished her job weeks ago, but when it was unveiled to the public, she was always invited to attend. Now, she stayed for the entire night, just to have something to do.

She really hoped that the divorce would be finalized early in the new year. She couldn’t take much more of this limbo. She wanted to move on, and at the same time she was terrified of Kate rejecting her, for whatever reason. Because she’d waited so long to contact her. Because Kate had met someone else. Because it was never going to be more than a weekend fling.

“I better go home and find something to wear,” Jen said as she stood up. “Dressy?”

“Definitely. Will I pick you up?”

“You’re not drinking?”

“No. Not when it’s a work thing,” Hollis said, pushing aside all her worries about the

future. For right, she'd do her best to enjoy tonight, and it would be so much easier with Jen at her side.

21

Kate opened her locker and took out her bag, slinging it across her body. As she shut the locker, she glanced at her phone, the screen lighting up with notifications. Her steps slowed as she read the alerts: five missed calls from Lexi in the last hour. A sense of unease washed over Kate as she quickly dialed back.

"Hey," Lexi answered, glasses clinking and people laughing in the background.

"Are you okay?" Kate asked, her heart racing.

"Yeah. Yeah, sorry for all the calls. You're working?"

"Just finished."

"Good. You need to get over here. Like right now."

Relief flooded through her. Nothing had happened. "Where are you?"

"Silver Tides."

"That's the restaurant where your girlfriend works."

"Yes, and technically, she's not my girlfriend. Yet. But Kate, listen to me." Lexi sighed into the phone. "Hollis is here."

Kate's breath caught in her throat as she fell back against the locker. "Are you sure? I mean, you only saw her Friday night when we were sitting outside."

“Hold on.” Lexi’s voice was muffled, but Kate could still make out what she was saying. “Hey babe, do you know that woman in the red dress by the bar?”

Ash’s voice was more distant, but Kate caught the right words. “She’s the interior designer.”

Kate nearly dropped the phone.

“Did you hear any of that?” Lexi asked.

“Yeah. It’s her,” Kate said with a sigh. “Fuck.”

“You gotta get over here.”

Kate leaned back against the cool metal locker. “I don’t know Lex. I’m not going to stalk her. What would I even be doing there? And I look like shit. I just finished my shift.”

“We’ll worry about all that when you get here. Just get here. Kate, you have to. You’ll regret it if you don’t. At the very least, you might get some closure. You might see her... And not feel anything. And then you can move on.”

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Kate bit back a laugh. That was the least likely reaction she was going to have. “Okay. I’ll see what I can do with my hair.” She looked down at her clothes. She was dressed in all black. The same thing she wore to work most days. A simple tank top and tight black pants. “I’m going to look like I’m working there. Is it fancy?”

“Hmm. Yeah. I’m wearing a blazer, but Ash is in a dress, and just about everyone else is either in a suit or a dress. Yeah.”

Kate blew out a breath. She was wasting time. At any moment, Hollis could leave. “Fuck it. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” She hung up and touched up her makeup in the staff bathroom, before fishing her keys out of her bag and getting in her car.

Kate’s journey to Silver Tides was a mix of anxiety and anticipation. She couldn’t believe she was doing this, heading to a fancy restaurant on a whim, just to see Hollis. The city lights blurred past as she drove, her heart thumping in her chest. She found a parking spot a block away and took a moment to gather herself before stepping out of the car.

As she approached Silver Tides, Kate slowed her pace, trying to calm her nerves. She took a deep breath before pulling open the heavy wooden door. The restaurant was bustling with activity, the clinking of glasses and the hum of conversation filling the air. Kate scanned the room, searching for Lexi and Ash, hoping that she could find them before Hollis saw her. Kate needed to get her shit together.

Kate spotted Lexi waving from a table just to her right. She made her way over, throwing a glance over her shoulder, but she couldn’t see Hollis. “Hey,” she said to Lexi, letting her wrap her up in a long hug. When she pulled back, she had a lump in

her throat. “Thank you for calling me, Lex.”

“I couldn’t not.”

“Hi,” Kate said to Ash. “Sorry about all this drama. Did Lexi fill you in?”

Ash smiled, tucking a piece of blond hair behind her ear. “She did, but since Lexi called you, we’ve obviously been keeping an eye on her, you know, just in case she’d leave. But uh...”

Kate’s eyes shifted to Lexi.

Lexi cleared her throat. “I think she’s here with someone. A woman around her age.”

Kate blinked, her stomach dropping. “Are you sure?” She looked between the two of them. “Couldn’t it be someone she works with?” Kate could barely hold a coherent thought in her head. She’d spent the last seven months telling herself that the reason that she hadn’t heard from Hollis was because she was still married, and maybe, when she was officially divorced, she’d reach out. But if Hollis was here with someone who wasn’t her husband...

Ash shrugged. “Maybe, but I’ve never seen this other woman before. I’ve seen Hollis a few times while she was working on the redesign. Not her though.”

Kate turned to scan the room again, but she still didn’t see Hollis. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. Her stomach churned, and she felt sick. She was about to go to the bar and get a glass of water when her eyes landed on Hollis. She was sitting on the far side of the bar, barely visible between the people waiting to be served a few feet away from Kate, but it was definitely her. And she was laughing with the woman sitting beside her who was probably in her forties, her strawberry blond hair glistening under the lights above the bar.

A jolt of longing shot through her body as her gaze settled on Hollis once more, but the overwhelming surge of anxiety coursing through her veins was too much. “I’m going to the restroom,” Kate said to Lexi tearing her eyes away from Hollis. She was already moving towards the sign above the door at the back of the restaurant before Lexi could answer.

As she pushed open the door, she was relieved to see that the four stalls were empty. She turned on the tap and ran her hands under the cool water before pressing her palm against the back of her neck while trying to take deep breaths.

22

Hollis caught the bartender’s attention and ordered another glass of wine for Jen and a water for her. Pride swelled in her chest as she looked around the busy restaurant, knowing that every design detail had been her choice. It had turned out even better than she’d imagined.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” Hollis said to Jen. “This is the most fun I’ve had at one of these unveilings in a long time.”

“You should invite me more often. I’ve enjoyed it, and this place looks amazing. All the subtle nautical touches. I’d forgotten how good you were.”

“Thanks.”

“I was here years ago, and it just didn’t have any atmosphere. The food was excellent, but now, with this redesign, they’re going to have a waitlist.”

Hollis nodded. “It was a fun project. It helped that the owner let me run with my own ideas on this one.”

The bartender came back with their drinks, and Hollis excused herself. “Be back in a minute.” She’d worked on far more homes than businesses, but this would do wonders for her when it came to landing commercial clients.

Hollis weaved her way through the crowd until she reached the back of the restaurant and pulled the restroom door open. She stopped in her tracks, hardly believing her own eyes. “Kate?” Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Kate’s familiar figure, dressed in tight black pants and a form-fitting tank top that showed off her toned arms. “What are you doing here?”

Hollis noted that Kate didn’t look half as surprised to see her. She must have spotted her earlier.

Kate opened her mouth, but Hollis shook her head as she glanced to her right, checking that all of the stall doors were opened.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hollis murmured as her heart raced. In one swift move, she tossed her clutch onto the counter and crossed the distance between them, pressing her lips against Kate’s. Months of longing culminated in this one impulsive moment, her hands cupping Kate’s cheeks as their kiss deepened.

Hollis could feel Kate’s hands on her waist, pulling her closer as she sighed into the kiss. Kate’s lips were so soft, and when she slid her tongue over Hollis’s, it set off a spark inside Hollis, awakening all of the feelings from that weekend together that she’d so desperately tried to forget.

Hollis ran her fingers through Kate’s hair as she matched the intensity of Kate’s kiss. The familiar scent of Kate’s perfume filled her senses, bringing her right back to their first night together.

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When they finally broke apart, both of them were panting, their foreheads pressed together as they caught their breath. Hollis's heart was still racing, but she couldn't help the smile that spread across her face.

Kate's eyes mirrored her own desire, and her hair was slightly disheveled from Hollis's fingers. "I thought I'd never see you again," she said, her voice wavering.

"I never stopped thinking about you," Hollis said, letting her hands fall to Kate's bare arms.

"What about the woman you're here with? You're not together?" Kate's eyes searched hers.

"No. That's Jen. My best friend." Hollis swallowed, her throat suddenly tight. "Are you... Are you seeing anyone? I shouldn't have just..."

"No," Kate said, shaking her head. "I'm still trying to figure out how to get over you," she said with a sigh, her voice a mixture of frustration and longing.

"Please don't." Hollis bit her lip. There were so many things she wanted to say, but she was aware of where they were and the fact that they could be interrupted at any moment.

Kate took a step back, her hands sliding away from Hollis's hips, and Hollis instantly missed the warmth of her touch. Kate held out her hand. "Give me your phone."

Without hesitation, Hollis reached for her clutch and popped it open, pulling out her

phone.

Kate took it, her fingers brushing Hollis's. "I don't trust you," she stated bluntly, and Hollis simply nodded, watching Kate dial her own number. Then Kate's phone was vibrating in her pocket. "I'm going to use this," she declared, handing Hollis back her phone. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah." Hollis pressed her lips together. "Kate, you have no idea how many times I wanted to text you."

"Why didn't you?"

"I'm still technically married, but I'm tired of waiting. Just today, I was ready to cave in. I was going to contact you. I uh... I found out my husband's been cheating on me, and I have proof." It felt so strange saying it out loud. "I'm tired of putting my life on hold for the sake of this divorce. If I get caught? I won't lose any ground."

Kate visibly swallowed. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, I want to see you." Hollis felt her lips sliding into a smile as she spoke. "I've turned into a workaholic trying not to think about you. I keep going back and forth. Was it just an incredible weekend together? Would that connection be gone if we met again?"

"I think it's safe to say that it's not." Kate reached for her hand. "I know we'll have to be careful, but I want this too."

"Come back to the bar with me and meet Jen."

"She knows?"

“Yes. She’s the only one who does.” Hollis ran her thumb over the back of Kate’s hand. “I came out to her a few months ago, but I actually only told her about you earlier today.”

A slow smile came to Kate’s lips. “You really were going to text me.”

“Yes, I was.” Hollis leaned in and brushed her lips over Kate’s again. Hollis slipped her free hand underneath Kate’s tank top, unable to be this close to Kate without exploring, without refreshing her memory of how incredibly soft her skin was. Kate moaned into the kiss as Hollis’s hand gripped her waist, sliding up further until she was cupping her breast through her bra.

Kate pressed her body against Hollis’s, deepening the kiss before pulling away. “We can’t. Not here. I’m not capable of being sensible when I’m around you,” she said, taking a step back and putting some space between them, their hands falling away.

“Neither am I.” Hollis turned to the mirror and opened her clutch to find her lipstick which badly needed to be touched up.

Kate ran a hand through her hair and adjusted her tank top.

“Ready?” Hollis asked as she took one last look at her reflection.

“To meet your best friend?” Kate asked with a laugh. “Not at all.”

Hollis’s heels clicked across the tiles as she pulled open the door for Kate. “You coming?”

“Just admiring the view.” Kate’s eyes trailed up her body as she spoke. “That dress is...”

Hollis bit back a smile. “I can’t wait to get you in my bed again.”

Kate followed her back to the bar, and when Jen turned, it was like she knew. It must have been written all over Hollis’s face.

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“Jen, I’d like you to meet Kate. Kate, this is Jen.”

Jen smiled as her gaze moved from Kate to Hollis. “The Kate?”

Hollis could feel herself blushing beneath her makeup. “Yes.”

“Wow. How did this happen?” Jen asked, looking from one to the other. “Do you work here, Kate?”

“No.” Kate shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she looked at Hollis. “Do you know the friend I was with that weekend that we met? Lexi? Her girlfriend actually works here, and when Lexi saw you, she called me.”

Hollis could see Jen grinning like a fool out of the corner of her eye.

“And I rushed over,” Kate said. She looked down at her clothes. “Which is why I look like this.”

Jen was still smiling when she spoke. “Well, you look great. And it’s a good thing that both of you have such good friends.”

“It is,” Kate agreed.

“What do you do, Kate?” Jen asked as she reached for her wine.

“I went back to college. I just have a year left, and then I’m hoping to get into social work. But right now, I’m working at a sports bar not far from campus.”

Hollis turned when she felt a light touch on her arm. It was her personal assistant. “Am I wanted?” Hollis asked.

Her PA nodded. “The table in the back corner with four gentlemen. They’re interested in having their office space redesigned.”

“Duty calls,” Hollis said, giving her attention to Jen and Kate again. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I’m going to get going,” Kate said with a smile tugging at her lips. “We’ll be in touch?”

Hollis melted at the mixture of longing and hope in Kate’s eyes. “Yes. We will,” she answered, unable to resist reaching for her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“It was lovely to meet you,” Kate said to Jen. Her gaze lingered on Hollis before she turned, weaving her way back through crowd gathered by the bar.

Hollis watched her go until she was completely out of sight. There was an ache in her chest, but it was so different than the one that had settled there these last few months. There was hope now. Anticipation. Kate hadn’t moved on.

“She’s young,” Jen said, taking Hollis away from her thoughts.

“Hm. I know.”

“But not immature. That’s an important distinction.”

“You barely spoke to her.”

“Yeah,” Jen said with a shrug. “But I trust your judgement, and you can get a feel for

someone in just a few minutes. Social work? That's not a job for the faint hearted."

Hollis had filed away that bit of information, that Kate was in college. It could have struck Hollis as a negative, that she could potentially be dating a student, but it hadn't. Going back to college was a big deal, and she wanted to ask Kate more about it. Why she wanted to get into social work? Had something happened to her in her youth that was motivating that career choice?

"You were gone for quite a while," Jen said as she sipped her wine.

"I ran into Kate in the restroom."

Jen laughed. "Well... That explains the rosy cheeks."

"Alright," Hollis said with a roll of her eyes. "I have to go mingle."

"Take your time," Jen said with a smile.

Hollis made her way over to the table her PA had pointed out, her stride confident, her heart light. Things might just be working out for her after all.

Kate picked up some food on the way home and then took a long, hot shower in an attempt to wind down after a long day at work and the completely unexpected evening she'd just had. When she left Lexi and Ash at the restaurant, Kate knew she'd had a goofy grin on her face, but why wouldn't she? The woman she'd spent the last seven months thinking about still wanted her.

Kate slid on her black pajama shorts and matching tank top and padded into the living room. She stretched out on the couch knowing that she was not going to sleep if she went to bed. She'd find a rom-com to watch or maybe a horror. She wasn't sure what she was in the mood for. She kind of still wanted to bask in this feeling for a little while longer, because she'd just started to come to terms with the idea that nothing would ever happen with Hollis. That she'd never even get to see her again.

She reached for her phone and started typing out a text. She wasn't going to wait around for Hollis to make the first move again. If this was what they both wanted, then there was no point waiting. And Kate couldn't handle the idea of Hollis backtracking. If a week went by and Kate sent a text then, would Hollis respond?

Kate needed to catch Hollis while she was still fresh in her mind, and if she felt even a fraction of what Kate was feeling right now, Hollis would reply.

She stopped and started typing a few times before deleting the entire message and starting over.

I was embarrassed to admit to Jen how I ended up at Silver Tides tonight, but right

now I couldn't care. I'm just happy that I got to see you again.

Kate stared at the screen, inhaling a sharp breath before pressing send and sliding the phone back onto the coffee table and out of reach. It was done, and she wasn't expecting anything tonight. Hollis might still be at the restaurant or getting ready for bed. Her stomach churned. Would she be in bed with her husband right now when Kate was texting her? That thought brought a strange mix of jealousy and disappointment.

Never did she think she'd be involved with a married woman. It just wasn't something that she even thought she'd be capable of doing, and part of her wanted to reason that this wasn't that. Hollis wasn't happy. She didn't have kids. And apparently, her husband cheats on her. Kate wasn't exactly wrecking a happy home, but it still felt so wrong.

She blew out a breath. She just had to figure out a way to make these next few weeks or months work, for both of them. Kate had to accept that this wasn't the ideal situation to be in but also that it wasn't forever. Hollis was actually getting a divorce. It wasn't all talk. And if up until Hollis found somewhere else to live, she slept in the same bed as her husband, Kate would have to live with that.

Before she had a chance to spiral, her phone chimed, and she was reaching for it straight away. With shaking fingers, she opened the message.

Hollis

I still can't believe that happened. It feels a bit like a dream, but then again so did our first meeting.

I wish you hadn't left.

Kate smiled.

Kate

I crashed your party. I had to go. Plus I really wasn't dressed for the occasion.

Hollis

You looked amazing and it wasn't my party but I'm so glad you crashed it.

Kate

Me too.

As Kate thought about what to say next, another message popped up on her screen.

Hollis

Are you home?

Kate's heart started to race.

Kate

Yes

Hollis

Can I come over?

Kate sucked in a breath.

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Kate

Are you okay with me being underdressed for the second time tonight? I'm in my pajamas.

'I don't care what you're wearing. It won't be on for long.'

Kate dropped her phone onto her stomach and threw her head back, a grin on her face. Thankfully, Lexi was going to Ash's place tonight, and there was no one here to witness her acting like this much of a fool. And Hollis wasn't messing around.

Kate typed out her address.

Kate

Don't keep me waiting.

"Fuck," Kate said out loud to no one. "Fuck."

She pushed herself off the couch and hurried down the short hallway to her room. She needed to dry her hair and put on some perfume.

Her eyes moved over her modest room. She turned off the overhead light and flicked on the floor lamp. The warm glow from the salt lamp on her dresser added to the mood lighting. She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart, and went into her closet to grab some fresh sheets, changing them quickly, because she had no idea how long Hollis would be.

As she dried her hair, she still couldn't believe that Hollis would really be here in a few minutes. It just seemed too good to be true.

She could feel the fluttering of butterflies in her stomach when she thought about Hollis's last message. There was no doubt that they'd end up in her bed, and Kate couldn't wait to get her hands on Hollis again. It was hard to believe that it had only been seven months since that unforgettable weekend they had spent together, because it felt more like seven years. Those months had dragged on, and the idea that Kate didn't have to wait any longer to run her hands over Hollis's smooth skin, to watch her come undone, sent a rush of anticipation through her entire body.

24

Hollis tugged at the lapels of the black blazer she had on over her dress as she waited for Kate to answer the door. She remembered how nervous she'd been when they'd met, when all of this was new to her, but after that weekend, she'd spent months dreaming about what it would be like to spend the night with Kate again, to have her in her arms. And she was so glad that Kate had texted her, because if she hadn't Hollis would be home right now, with only memories of tonight's kiss lingering in her mind.

When Kate's door swung open, Hollis's eyes raked over Kate. In black shorts that showed off plenty of leg and a black tank top, clearly without a bra underneath, Hollis couldn't stop herself from openly checking her out.

Kate smirked, grabbing a hold of the lapels that Hollis had just been fussing with, dragging her inside. Kate kicked the door shut and backed her up against it. With Kate in her bare feet and Hollis in her heels, there were a few inches between them, but Kate still managed to take the lead, her hand on Hollis's cheek as she tilted her head up to meet Hollis's lips.

Hollis sighed into the kiss, pushing her blazer over her shoulders and letting it fall to her floor. She kicked off her heels and switched their positions, her hands sliding under Kate's tank top as her back hit the door. A ragged moan left Kate's lips as Hollis's hands covered her breasts, hungrily caressing them, swiping her thumb over her nipple, hardening it in seconds while Hollis deepened the kiss.

Hollis almost felt like she was possessed. As the weeks and then months went by, the idea that Hollis would ever be with Kate like this again became more like a fantasy than anything else. But tonight had changed that.

"Oh god, Hollis," Kate moaned, her head hitting against the door as Hollis's lips found the spot she knew Kate liked just beneath her earlobe, before capturing Kate's lips in a heart-stopping kiss.

Hollis's hands groped Kate's breasts while Kate's hands tugged at the fabric of her dress, hiking it up until she was clutching Hollis's thighs and then her ass. Hollis groaned, her mind going blank with Kate's fingers splayed over her ass, her tongue slipping into her mouth.

Hollis dropped one of her hands, easily pushing it down over Kate's stomach and beneath the waistband of her shorts and her underwear, her fingers finding the heat between Kate's legs.

Kate moaned into the kiss as Hollis circled her, her other hand still on Kate's breast, toying with her nipple, rolling it between her fingers.

Hollis broke the kiss, both of them breathing heavily. "You have no idea how many times I've thought of this," Hollis murmured as she held Kate's gaze and pushed two fingers inside.

Kate's hand moved to her hip, almost to steady herself as her eyes fluttered shut, a

low moan on her lips. “I’ve missed you,” Kate sighed, leaning in to kiss Hollis as she slowly found a rhythm. “Just like that,” Kate whimpered between kisses. “You feel so good.”

Hollis moaned against Kate’s lips, her fingers moving faster now. “You’re so wet,” Hollis panted, and then she lowered her head, trailing rough kisses over Kate’s chest, yanking the fabric of her tank top down to take her nipple into her mouth.

Kate gasped, swaying into Hollis, her hand in Hollis’s hair as she flicked and sucked. Hollis kept a steady rhythm with her fingers until Kate came undone, her hips bucking, her grip on Hollis tightening.

Kate’s head fell back against the door, her chest heaving, and Hollis stood up straight, a satisfied smile on her lips.

“You’re so beautiful,” Hollis whispered as she carefully withdrew her fingers.

Kate gave her a lopsided-smile as she tried to catch her breath. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Do what?” Hollis asked with a smirk as she leaned in to brush her lips over Kate’s.

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Kate's hand was on her cheek. "Make me feel like this."

Hollis's breath hitched. The way Kate was looking at her right now was enough to make her heart skip a beat.

"Come to bed with me," Kate whispered as she leaned in to kiss her.

Hollis let Kate take her hand, leading her down the hall and into her bedroom.

25

Kate's fingers traced a gentle path through Hollis's hair, brushing it away from her shoulder as she leaned in to kiss her soft skin. As she pulled away, she glanced up at the clock on the nightstand.

"Hey," Kate whispered, unsure if Hollis had fallen asleep.

"Hmm?" Hollis shifted onto her back, her eyes slowly fluttering open.

"It's almost one." Kate couldn't bring herself to mention her husband. "Do you have to go?"

Hollis turned onto her side to face her. "Sorry I dozed off." She reached out to gently tuck a stray strand of hair behind Kate's ear. "No. I don't have to go. He's away this weekend." Hollis searched her eyes. "Unless you... Have to be up early or..." Her voice trailed off.

Kate leaned in, unable to resist brushing her lips over Hollis's. "No," she murmured. "I'd love for you to stay." She kissed her again, her hand on Hollis's cheek. "I'm sorry I left that morning," Kate said as she pulled back to meet Hollis's eyes. "I knew I wouldn't be able to say goodbye without getting emotional which just..." She bit her lip. "It didn't make any sense to me. How I could feel like that after just two nights? And I really didn't want to scare you off. So, I left. And I wish I'd been stronger than that." Kate's hand slid down from Hollis's cheek to her shoulder, then down to her arm, gently caressing her skin.

Hollis's lips curved into a slight smile. "I was disappointed when I woke up alone, but I know exactly what you mean. It was the same for me. And it shouldn't have been. That's what I kept thinking about. That it wasn't possible to feel that much after one weekend. That it must have just been the amazing sex, and it was clouding my judgement," she said with a bigger smile. "But seeing you tonight." She inhaled a shaky breath. "I can't say that. I know how I feel. I know it's crazy. But..."

"Then we're both a little crazy." Kate kissed her again, parting her lips against Hollis's. She ran her hand through Hollis's hair as she deepened the kiss.

The sheets fell away as Kate sat up, maneuvering herself on top of Hollis, straddling her as she leaned down to capture her lips again. Kate's hand trailed down Hollis's neck, over her chest, between the curve of her breasts, her fingertips dancing over her stomach until they reached the heat between her legs. With precise and deliberate movements, Kate circled Hollis's clit, drawing out a low whimper before slowly sliding her fingers inside. Hollis arched her back, pressing into Kate's hand as she let out a breathless moan.

"You're so beautiful," Kate said, her eyes raking over Hollis from her hair splayed over her pillow to her perfect breasts. Kate eased her fingers out and set a slow rhythm. Everything with them had been so heated, so desperate. Right now, Kate wanted to draw this out. She leaned down, brushing her lips against Hollis's neck.

Kate's lips trailed lower, kissing and nipping at the sensitive skin of Hollis's collarbone. Her free hand caressed Hollis's side, tracing the delicate curve of her waist before cupping her breast. Hollis arched into the touch, a quiet moan escaping her lips as Kate's thumb brushed over her nipple.

Kate kept her fingers moving languidly in and out of Hollis, and Kate moaned as Hollis reached up, tangling her hand in Kate's hair, bringing her lips back down for a searing kiss, Hollis's hips rocking against her as their tongues danced. Kate had already come five or six times, but she was so close again.

Hollis broke the kiss, burying her head in Kate's neck, her hands sliding down Kate's back to cup her ass. "Please," Hollis panted. "I can't take much more."

Kate pressed her left hand flat against the bed, holding herself up as she added a third finger, picking up her pace, each thrust harder than the last until Hollis was clinging to her, her hips bucking against Kate's hand, a string of curses on her lips.

"Oh fuck, Kate," Hollis groaned, her voice raw as her body trembled against Kate's.

Kate nearly came when Hollis did just from listening to her.

Hollis sighed as her grip on Kate relaxed, her breathing heavy, a slow smile coming to her lips.

"What?" Kate asked, smiling down at her.

"I just thought of something."

"And what's that?"

Hollis's hands were on her thighs. "Come up here." She helped Kate move further up

until her legs were straddling Hollis's face. Without another word, Hollis's tongue was on her clit, and Kate swayed forward, reaching for the wooden headboard. Kate's breath caught as Hollis's tongue worked over her clit. She was already so sensitive that every flick set off sparks.

Kate's hips gently rocked against Hollis's mouth, a low moan escaping her lips. "Oh my god." Kate's body was on fire. She was already so close, but when Hollis took her fully in her mouth, sucking gently on her clit, Kate's body shuddered, waves of pleasure washing over her as she threw her head back, crying out in ecstasy.

"Hollis," Kate gasped, feeling like she might pass out from the intensity of that orgasm, but then she felt Hollis's hands on her waist, guiding her down to the bed. Hollis shifted to make room for her, and Kate sighed as Hollis wrapped her arm around her.

Kate's heart was still thudding in her chest, her breathing slowly returning to normal as their legs intertwined, their bodies pressed together. Hollis kissed Kate softly, her lips lingering, and Kate opened her mouth to her. Hollis's tongue skimmed over her own, and Kate could taste herself on Hollis's lips.

Hollis's fingers trailed lightly over Kate's back as they continued to kiss, and like it always seemed to be with Hollis, time slipped away.

Eventually, Hollis pulled back. "I think I need to stop being surprised by how intense everything is with you," she said as her eyes searched Kate's.

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Kate traced Hollis's jawline with her fingertips. "I know," she whispered. "As much as I love spending time with you in bed," she started to say with a hint of a smile on her lips, "I'd like to go on a real date with you."

Hollis smiled, a soft laugh bubbling up from her throat. "I'd love that." She leaned in to kiss her once more, and Kate didn't think she could ever get tired of kissing this woman. "And do you know what else I'd love?"

"What?"

"To fall asleep in your arms." Hollis said those words with such tenderness and honesty, that Kate's heart melted.

Kate reached for the covers that had fallen away. Hollis kissed her before whispering 'goodnight,' and then she turned away from her. Kate snuggled up against her back, wrapping her arm around her stomach, nuzzling into her neck and inhaling the sweet scent of Hollis's shampoo.

Kate's heart swelled as she felt Hollis's breathing deepen. How had she gotten this lucky? Yes, they still had a lot to work out, but Kate couldn't deny the fact that she was falling so hard for this woman.

26

Hollis followed Kate along the dirt trail on their way up to Griffith Observatory, the sunlight disappearing with each step. In the fading light as they climbed higher, she couldn't help but feel a sense of awe as she looked out at the city skyline. The sunset

painted the sky with vibrant pinks and oranges as they reached the lookout.

“Have you been up here before?” Kate asked as they found a secluded spot away from other visitors to sit down.

“Never at sunset.” Hollis wrapped her arm around Kate’s waist as they took in the view.

The last two weeks had been as perfect as they could possibly be considering the circumstances. Hollis had almost been surprised when Dave knocked on her bedroom door last night to let her know that he’d booked his flights to spend Christmas with his family in Chicago. She’d hardly seen him these last few weeks. He’d been sleeping in the guest room since she filed for divorce, and they kept missing each other with their busy schedules.

Hollis was also spending as much time as possible with Kate. Any evening Kate wasn’t working and she didn’t have a meeting with a client, they were at her apartment or out having dinner. Hollis hadn’t stayed over since that first night, but when Dave said he’d be gone for a week, Hollis already knew she’d ask Kate to stay.

Below them the city’s lights twinkled as the sky grew darker, the pinks fading into purples, and Hollis asked Kate something she’d been meaning to for a while now. “Why social work?” Her heart beat a little faster as she heard Kate inhale sharply beside her. Hollis couldn’t help but wonder if something had happened in her past to motivate her to make that career choice.

“I’ve always felt really lucky,” Kate said softly. “That I didn’t lose myself to my surroundings. Looking back, I don’t know how I didn’t. And I know there’s plenty of other people, in all kinds of different situations, who can’t get beyond their environment.” Kate exhaled. “I’m probably not making sense, but the short version is my family is really religious. I grew up in Bakersfield. My dad’s a pastor.”

Hollis felt a lump form in her throat as Kate's words hung in the air. She could sense where this conversation was heading.

"I knew I couldn't come out," Kate continued. "I'd known from an early age that I was into women, but I had enough sense to keep it from my parents. When I was eighteen, my parents booked a vacation for themselves. But their flight was canceled, and when they got home a few hours later, I already had my girlfriend over. There were clothes thrown across the hallway floor, my bedroom... And we were in the shower, so we didn't even hear the car pull up. There was no time to try and cover up what was going on. So, my dad threw the two of us out."

Hollis pulled Kate closer, wrapping her arm tightly around her waist and placing a tender kiss on her head. "I'm sorry that happened to you," she whispered.

"I lived with her for a few weeks, and then I came down here." She went quiet for a few seconds. "I haven't spoken to them since." Kate took a deep breath. "I always knew it wasn't going to end well, but I thought I'd have a few more years. And I guess, I'd always hoped that while they wouldn't approve, they wouldn't disown me either."

Hollis couldn't even imagine what that must have been like.

"So, I guess," Kate said, leaning further into Hollis, "I just liked the idea of helping people. I'm not even sure what that'll look like yet, but the last few years in New York I felt like I was stuck in a rut, and it wasn't just the relationship I was in. It was that I wasn't giving back. I was just trying to pay the rent and survive. I want to do something that will help somebody."

"You'll figure it out," Hollis said, resting her head against Kate's.

They sat together in silence for a while, watching the stars begin to twinkle as the city

lights grew brighter. Hollis suppressed a shiver. “How about we head back?”

“Sure,” Kate agreed, standing up and offering Hollis her hand, turning on the flashlights on their phones as they made their way back to her car.

As Hollis drove them back to Kate’s apartment, she was glad that she hadn’t asked Kate about her plans for Christmas before now.

“Thanks for this evening,” Kate said as Hollis parked outside Kate’s building. “I know you’ve got a dinner to get to.”

Hollis glanced at the time. She’d have to rush home to get changed and be at the hotel on time, but she didn’t want to leave the lookout before they were ready. “Thanks for suggesting it. I didn’t think I’d get to see you today,” Hollis said, reaching over to find Kate’s hand. “I wish I could come up, but I have to get going.”

“I know.” Kate leaned over, lightly caressing Hollis’s cheek as she kissed her.

“Hey,” Hollis said as she pulled away. “Do you want to spend Christmas with me?”

Kate couldn’t hide her surprise. “I uh... I didn’t think that was?”

“I have the house to myself for a week. You can stay for as little or as much of that time as you want.” Hollis watched Kate’s smile spread. “We can talk about it again. But I just wanted to put it out there.”

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“I don’t know what to say.” Kate was still smiling. “Yes, obviously. I’ve just gotten so used to...” Kate shook her head. “Anyway, yes.” She leaned in for another kiss. “Don’t be late.”

“Night.” Hollis watched Kate walk away, her heart still beating fast. And as she drove home, she let her mind wander, imagining waking up together several mornings in a row, having dinner together. It was probably too soon. It was definitely too soon. But Hollis wasn’t wasting having the house to herself for that long with Dave on the other side of the country.

27

In the lead up to Christmas, Kate barely had a free moment. She lifted her weekend bag onto her bed, packing enough clothes to last for a few days. Her first semester back at college had flown by, especially the last week, when she’d handed in two papers, hating that she needed to pull an all-nighter to get it done. She’d still been working every weekend and a few evening shifts, and whatever time she had left, she tried to spend it with Hollis.

Right now, Kate should have been exhausted, but she was strangely energized. Last night, Lexi had told her that this was the happiest she’d ever seen her, and Kate told her the same thing. Lexi was officially with Ash now, and they made such a lovely couple.

A knock at the door took her from her thoughts as she added a few pairs of her sexiest underwear to the bag. “Come in.”

“Working tomorrow?” Lexi asked as she came in and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “I don’t mind. Christmas Eve is the same as any other day for me.”

“Do you want to come with me? You know my parents love you. Although, they’d probably think we’re together like they did last time I brought you home with me.”

Kate smiled. “You’re not bringing Ash?”

“No.” Lexi pressed her lips together. “I want to, but it’s too soon. I don’t want to mess this up.”

“I actually have plans,” Kate said as she kept packing.

“Oh? You’re going away with Hollis?”

“No. She’s got the house to herself for a few days.” Kate met her gaze.

“You too have it so bad,” Lexi said with a smile. “I love it. Any idea when the divorce will be official?”

“No.” Kate sighed. “Soon. She hopes.”

“She’s okay with all this sneaking around?”

“Yeah. She told me that her husband is cheating on her, so I think she’s less worried now. If we do get caught, she’s got proof that he’s been unfaithful too.” Kate zipped up her bag. “I hate that I’m even involved in this, but at the same time...”

“I know. Soon things will be normal,” Lexi said, giving her a reassuring smile.

“I hope so.”

28

Hollis had spent the last few days tying up any loose ends at work and pushing anything that wasn't urgent into the new year, because at this time of year, most people didn't want to be thinking about paint or fabric choices. They wanted to spend time with their families, so she'd had more free time than she was used to. Kate was insanely busy between work and college, and Hollis kept herself busy since Dave left two days ago, having Jen over for dinner last night and spending today cleaning the house.

She'd put on a movie after she'd gotten changed into her pajamas, patiently waiting for eleven o'clock to arrive, when Kate said she'd be here after she finished work, but she couldn't concentrate on it fully. Her mind kept wandering. And as her favorite Christmas song played in the movie, she realized that Kate might think it was strange that she hadn't a single decoration up.

With each year, she'd put in less effort without even realizing it, until last year just a modest tree went up and only for two weeks.

Hollis heard a car pull up just a few minutes before midnight, and she padded to the door, pulling it open. “Hey,” she said with a smile as Kate came to the door with a weekend bag in hand.

“Hi,” Kate said, her hair pulled back in a ponytail today, dressed in what Hollis guessed was her usual work attire, black pants and a black racerback tank top. “Sorry, I got hung up.”

“Don't worry about it.” Hollis took her bag from her as Kate came inside.

“Wow,” Kate said with a lopsided-smile as she looked at her.

“What?” Hollis glancing down at her red plain pajamas bottoms and the black tank top she had on.

“I’ve never actually seen you in pajamas before.” She was grinning now. “I love it.”

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Hollis shook her head as she smiled, reaching for Kate's hand as she closed the door, pushing her back against it as she ran her hands along Kate's sides, leaning in to kiss her passionately.

They hadn't seen each other in five days, but after spending so much time together in the previous month, it seemed like so much longer.

Kate sighed as Hollis's tongue swept into her mouth, Kate's hands on Hollis's waist, their bodies pressed together, and Hollis couldn't wait until this was her life, when Kate would come home to her. She'd lost track of how many times she'd told herself it was too much, too soon, when it came to how she felt about Kate, and Hollis was starting to let those thoughts float by. She couldn't help how she felt, and thankfully, Kate was right there with her.

"I'm so glad you're here," Hollis murmured as she pulled away, her eyes searching Kate's.

"Me too." Kate looked at Hollis as if she was the only woman in the world, and it still made Hollis a little breathless.

"You must be exhausted," Hollis said, reaching for Kate's hand as she took a step back.

Kate's lips curved into a smile. "Yeah. I am."

Hollis's hand slid out of Kate's as she bent to grab Kate's bag. "Come on. Let's go upstairs." She let Kate go ahead of her.

“Do you really have to give up this house?” Kate asked, sliding her hand along the polished wooden bannister. “It’s beautiful.”

“Hm. But I designed it,” she said as she climbed the stairs. “It looked completely different when we bought it. I can do it again. On a smaller scale this time though.” They reached the top of the stairs. “The master is at the end of the hall.”

Kate pushed the door open, hesitating once she was inside, as if she was afraid to go any further.

Hollis left Kate’s bag on the bed. “This has been my room for months. Just me.”

With a small nod, Kate reached up and tugged on the elastic band that held her hair in place. She tousled her hair, letting it fall along her usual part line as she turned to Hollis. Kate’s gorgeous features were marked with exhaustion, and Hollis found herself closing the distance between them to wrap her arms around her.

“We’re nearly there,” Hollis whispered, hoping that she was right, because she couldn’t shake the feeling that the weight of this situation would start to put cracks in their relationship if it wasn’t resolved soon.

29

Kate woke up with Hollis’s arm draped over her stomach, and she closed her eyes again, taking a deep breath, savoring this moment, because she knew they only had a few more days like this left.

These last three days with Hollis had been magic. It was a preview of what their lives would look like if this really did work out, and Kate couldn’t get enough of it. All of it. Waking up in Hollis’s arms, taking turns making breakfast or dinner, stretching out on the couch to watch a movie with no space between them.

Hollis stirred beside her, her arm sliding away, and Kate rolled onto her back. “Morning,” Hollis said, her voice rough. “What time is it?”

“Almost ten.” Kate stretched her arms over her head. “I wish I hadn’t agreed to work today. I have to get up.” She leaned in to kiss Hollis’s shoulder before slipping out of bed.

“Have a shower.” Hollis propped herself up. “I’ll make us some coffee and something to eat.”

“I won’t be long.” Kate leaned over the bed to kiss her. She knew if she stayed in bed beside Hollis, she’d be late for work.

Kate padded into the master bathroom, turning on the water, and stepping under the hot spray. As she ran her hands through her hair, she couldn’t help but replay the last few days in her mind. It was all the little moments that stuck out. They hadn’t done anything special, other than spend time together. They’d barely left the house, just to go for a hike and some lunch yesterday afternoon. But it was how quickly they’d fallen into this domesticity.

When she’d agreed to come here for the holidays, she hadn’t put too much thought into what that would look like. Would it be awkward? Would they get sick of each other spending that much time together when they were still getting to know one another? They’d essentially be living together for the better part of a week. If this wasn’t going to work, it wouldn’t take long for them to discover that.

But the days had gone by smoothly, effortlessly almost, and Kate was already thinking ahead to how she was going to go back to their previous routine of meeting three or four nights a week for dinner or a quick drink.

Kate finished washing her hair and toweled off. She wasn’t going to spend anymore

time doubting this. So far, other than Hollis still being married, everything had been so natural between them since they saw each other again last month. They'd just have to figure out how to navigate the next few weeks or months or however long it was until Hollis was finally free.

The idea of walking down the street or on a beach in the spring, hand in hand, had her smiling to herself as she put on her work clothes. She pulled her hair back into a messy bun and put on some light makeup before going downstairs her sling back on her shoulder, following the delicious aroma of coffee and eggs.

"Thank you," Kate said, coming up behind Hollis as she turned off the stove, placing a kiss on her shoulder.

They ate at the breakfast bar as they had every morning, and Hollis said exactly what she was thinking about. "I wish this didn't have to end in two days."

"I know." Kate finished her eggs. "I was thinking the same thing. In the shower. Now. I was too afraid to say it though," she said as she got up and loaded the dishwasher with their empty plates. "I feel like I'm the one trying to show restraint now."

"Hey," Hollis said, catching her hand as she came back around the counter. She reached up to caress Kate's cheek. "Nothing about this has been conventional so far. Why would it be now?" Hollis kissed her tenderly. "Do you have time for another coffee before you go?"

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“Sure,” Kate said, pulling away. “I’ll get them. I’ve got about thirty minutes before I have to get going.”

Kate had just brought over two mugs of coffee when they both jumped, their eyes wide as they both caught the distinct sound of a key turning in the front door before it swung open and then clicked shut. Kate’s heart stuttered, and the way the color had drained from Hollis’s face told her that she wasn’t wrong to jump to the worst conclusion.

Her husband was home.

Kate sunk onto the bar stool, her stomach twisting into knots. There was nowhere to hide. Thankfully, her things were all in Hollis’s bedroom, so it wouldn’t look like Kate had been living here for the last three days, but how was Hollis going to explain this random woman in their house? Would she say they were friends? Would he even believe that?

At least they were both dressed. Kate was grasping at straws, trying to find something positive to fill her mind with while her body tensed up, his footsteps approaching the kitchen.

“What are you doing home?” Hollis asked when he entered the kitchen.

Kate felt the blood drain from her face, the sight of Professor Clarke standing just a few feet away from her making her light headed. No. No. How...?

He hadn’t noticed her yet. His eyes narrowed, locked on Hollis. “What a greeting?”

he said with a sarcastic laugh. “I felt like coming home a few days early. Is that a problem?” His eyes shifted to Kate, and she had to hide her now trembling hands, sliding them off the counter and onto her lap, her pulse swishing in her ears. His eyebrow lifted, and Kate couldn’t miss the smirk that came to his lips. He recognized her. She wasn’t sure if he would considering that she sat at the back of his lectures. How was she going to explain being here?

“Dave,” Hollis said, her voice rough. “This is Kate. She’s shadowing me.”

Dave’s gaze never left Kate’s. “You want to be an interior designer?” His smile was sickly sweet. “And you’re working over the holidays?” he asked Hollis, finally looking away from Kate.

“Not every client celebrates Christmas,” Hollis said coolly.

“Uh huh.” Dave nodded, his eyes returning to Kate.

“I have to go,” Kate said, already standing up, her legs wobbly. She barely glanced at Hollis. Her heart was ready to jump out of her chest. Her stuff was upstairs, but she couldn’t get it. At least, she had her bag and her car keys. She’d have to come back later to get her weekend bag or maybe Hollis could bring it the next time they got to see each other.

Kate strode out to her car without looking back. She fumbled with her keys, fishing them out of her bag and pressing the button to unlock her car. As she reached for the door handle and pulled it open, a strong hand grabbed it before she could get in.

“My wife is a terrible liar. Even if you weren’t in my class, I would have known that was bullshit.” Professor Clarke’s heated stare was fixed on her, his jaw clenched. “I know you’re into women. Students don’t think their professors notice anything, but we do. And you seem to have a few admirers closer to your own age. Why don’t you

forget about my wife, huh?”

“Does she know about your weakness for women half your age?” Kate asked without thinking, her voice surprisingly steady while her heart raced, and her stomach lurched.

“Well, apparently she has the same problem,” he sneered.

Kate swallowed hard, trying to get this conversation to end as soon as possible. “In a few weeks you’ll be divorced and none of this will matter.”

“Oh, it matters.” His piercing gaze studied her for a second, and it was as if a lightbulb had gone off in his mind, his eyebrows slowly lifting. “No wonder she let me have the house. She just wants this to be over.”

“Don’t you?”

“I’ve got a reputation to protect.”

Kate scoffed. “You have a reputation, alright.”

“Hey,” he practically growled, his tone becoming more aggressive. “You know you have to pass my class to graduate, don’t you?”

Kate’s pulse jumped. “You wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t? Why not? It’s your word against mine about these alleged affairs I’m having with my students.”

Kate inhaled a shaky breath, a wave of anxiety washing over her. “What do you want?”

Professor Clarke stared her down, his voice low. “Stay away from her. She’s still my wife.”

“Jesus Christ,” she muttered under her breath, her hand on her forehead as she leaned back against her car. She couldn’t deal with this now. She was going to be late for work. “Get your hand off my car,” she snapped at him, unable to hold back her anger any longer.

He held her gaze, like he was debating challenging her before finally taking a step back and walking over to his own car, opening the trunk and taking out a suitcase.

Kate jumped in her car and got out of there as quickly as possible, her hands clammy on the steering wheel. She needed time to process everything that had just happened, but she wasn’t sure there was much she could do. Right now, she needed to focus on the road and then get through her shift. She’d have to talk to Lexi later.

Hollis waited until their waitress was out of earshot before she continued to tell Jen about everything that had happened.

“So he just showed up?” Jen asked, her eyes wide.

“Yeah. Three days before he said he was coming back.” Hollis shook her head as she exhaled softly. “It could have been so much worse. Thankfully, Kate was going to work, so... She was dressed.” She could feel her cheeks heating up.

Jen smirked. “I take it that if he’d picked any other day, he would have gotten an eye full.”

Hollis’s lips tugged into a smile. “Yes.”

“But apart from this morning’s drama? It was all good?”

“Good?” Hollis reached for her wine. “It was like a dream. All of it. I’ve never felt that relaxed in my own home.” She swallowed down the emotion that came out of nowhere. “And I think that it just showed me how much I needed this divorce. How much I’ve been missing.”

“It’ll be worth it then,” Jen said. “All of this sneaking around.”

“So worth it. I have no doubts, which I know probably doesn’t make much sense.”

“Love rarely does.”

Hollis arched an eyebrow.

Jen’s eyes narrowed. “Even if you haven’t said it yet... That’s what this is, isn’t it? It’s not just mind blowing sex.”

“No,” Hollis said with a soft sigh. She somehow hadn’t realized it until now, but Jen was right. When Hollis thought about how she felt herself light up when Kate walked into a room, how everything else faded away, or how much she craved Kate’s touch, her attention, it was obvious. She’d never felt like this about anyone before. Nothing close. “I just wish he hadn’t come back,” she said, aware that Jen was waiting for her to say something. “You should have seen her, Jen. She completely froze. It was like she’d seen a ghost.” Hollis took a sip of wine. “I need to see her tonight. Make sure she’s okay.”

“Call her,” Jen said as she got up. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Hollis took her phone out of her bag. Nothing from Kate. She glanced at the time. Kate should have finished work about a half hour ago. Hollis tapped on her name, letting it ring, but Kate didn’t answer.

Hollis decided to send her a quick text.

Hey. Sorry about this morning. Call me when you get a chance.

Hollis put her phone away when Jen returned, and their meals arrived a few moments later. She tried to enjoy herself as Jen filled her in on her Christmas with her parents and all of her nieces and nephews, but she struggled to focus.

She checked her phone again more than an hour later, when they’d finished their

desserts. Still nothing from Kate.

After she'd said goodnight to Jen and got in her car, Hollis tried to call her again, and when she still got no answer, she decided to stop by Kate's apartment instead of going home.

31

When Kate got home from work, she took out a bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. "Drink?" she asked Lexi as she came into the kitchen, her eyebrows furrowed.

"Are we celebrating?" Lexi asked, her expression hopeful again.

"No."

"Right. Yeah," Lexi said. "Come and sit with me and tell me what's going on."

Kate followed her into the living room, carrying the bottle and two glasses. They sat on the couch, and she poured them each a large measure of whiskey. Kate left the bottle on the coffee table without putting the cap back on.

She knocked back hers.

Lexi stared at her. "Jesus. Did something happen at work?"

Kate shook her head, the whiskey burning her throat on its way down.

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“Wait, aren’t you supposed to be at Hollis’s still?”

Kate poured some more whiskey for herself. “I was there and after we had breakfast this morning, her husband came home. Three days early.”

“Shit.” Lexi grimaced. “What happened?” She took a sip of whiskey, throwing her arm over the back of the couch as she got comfortable.

“Lex, you are not going to believe this,” Kate said, her voice shaking slightly. Her hand trembled as she took another mouthful. “Hollis made some excuse about me working with her or something. I don’t even remember. I was too shocked to.”

“Why?”

Kate lifted her head to look at Lexi. “Her husband is Professor Clarke.”

Lexi’s jaw dropped. “What?” She blinked a few times. Then she knocked back her drink. “Pour me another. Fuck. What the actual fuck, Kate?”

“And then he followed me out to my car, because he obviously knew that I don’t want to be an interior designer.”

“What did he say?”

“To stay away from her.”

“So he knew,” Lexi said.

“Yeah. He knew I was gay somehow. I don’t know.”

“He has some balls saying that considering what he’s been up to for however many years,” Lexi said as she took another sip.

“Yeah, I pointed that out, to which he countered that I can’t graduate if I don’t pass his class.”

“Kate...” Lexi stared at her.

“It’s just a few more months. I already did seven,” she said, her voice betraying her as she took another drink.

“There has to be a way.”

A tear streaked down Kate’s cheek, and she reached up to wipe it away.

Kate shrugged. “Hollis says she has proof that he’s been cheating, but I couldn’t tell him that. I’d be showing her hand. I don’t know what to do. Hollis has called me twice already since I got off work. I don’t know what to say to her.”

Lexi took Kate’s glass from her and left both of them down, wrapping her arms around her in a long hug. “We’ll figure it out.” She ran her hand up and down Kate’s back.

Kate squeezed her eyes shut as she hugged her best friend back. She really didn’t want to start crying, because she wasn’t sure that she’d be able to stop.

“I’m going to call Ash,” Lexi said as she pulled away.

“No. Don’t. Go to the concert.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“I’ll be fine. Trust me.” Kate ran a hand through her hair. “Go.”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. No one really knocked on their door except Ash or Hollis, and Lexi was going to Ash’s now.

“I’ll get it,” Lexi said, and Kate wiped under her eyes, sure that her makeup was a mess.

Kate closed her eyes when she heard Hollis’s voice. “Hi. Is Kate home?”

She took a deep breath as she heard Lexi say that she was and that she was on her way out.

Her heart thudded against her ribs. She wasn’t ready to see her. She didn’t have a plan, and she had no idea how she was going to stop seeing Hollis, but she also knew that she’d worked too hard not to graduate.

Hollis stood back as Lexi brushed past her on her way out. She wandered into the living room to find Kate sitting on the couch with a tumbler in her hand.

“Hi,” Hollis said, swallowing. It was obvious something was wrong. She’d never seen Kate drink hard liquor, and as Hollis got closer, she could tell that Kate had been crying, her eyes red. “What’s happened?” she asked, leaving her bag on the arm chair and coming around to sit beside her, taking her free hand in hers.

Kate took a swig, finishing what was left in her glass. She leaned forward to put it on the coffee table, and a tear trickled down cheek. She reached up to wipe it away with the back of her hand. “I think we should take a break,” Kate said, avoiding her gaze, her voice rough.

“What?” Hollis dipped her head, desperate for Kate to look at her. “Did something happen?”

Kate shook her head, but Hollis remembered something. Dave had left the kitchen after Kate had, saying he was going to get his suitcase out of the car. He couldn’t have known what Kate was to her. Nothing had been out of place. They hadn’t been sitting too closely together.

“We just should,” Kate said with a sigh, taking Hollis away from her thoughts.

Hollis lifted her hand to Kate’s cheek. “Kate, talk to me. Please.”

Kate closed her eyes, shaking her head slightly, and Hollis's hand fell away.

"Everything was fine this morning," Hollis said, taking a deep breath, trying to calm the racing thoughts in her head. "Did he say something to you? After you left? I'll kill him."

"I don't want to complicate your life any further than I already have," Kate said in a rush, pushing herself off the couch.

Hollis was up in a second, grabbing her hand, an uneasy feeling settling in her stomach. "Kate, I need you to talk to me," she said, her voice wavering. "Whatever's happened, we can fix it. You just have to tell me."

"We can't." Kate's hand slid out of Hollis's as she shook her head. "It's..." She took a breath. "He's my professor." She pressed her lips together. "And he said that if I didn't stay away from you, I wasn't going to graduate. I need to pass his class, and obviously, that's not likely at the moment."

"That fucking asshole." Hollis ran her hand through her hair as Kate started to pace. "I'm so sorry, Kate. But we can fix this."

"No, we can't. I've put off my education before, and I can't do it again."

"Hey," Hollis said, putting her hand on Kate's hip to slow her steps. "Look at me. I'm going to fix this," Hollis said when Kate had turned to face her. "Do you trust me?"

Kate held her gaze. "Yes."

"Then let me sort this out."

"You should go."

“I was just out for dinner with Jen. And that’s where I still am if he asks,” Hollis said, lifting her hands to Kate’s cheeks. “We are not ending this, because he wants us to. Not after all the shit he’s been up to.” She wrapped her arms around Kate, holding her, hating that Kate had even been put in this position.

A plan was already forming in her mind. There was no way that she was going to stop seeing Kate for Dave’s benefit. Not a chance in hell.

33

Kate found a seat in the last row of the lecture hall, more than ready to get this semester started. She dreaded being back here, in Professor Clarke’s class, but the sooner she graduated, the sooner she could see Hollis.

The last two weeks had dragged by, and while they’d exchanged a few texts, they hadn’t seen each other. Hollis kept telling her to trust her, and that’s all Kate could do, even if she didn’t think there was any other way out of this besides waiting. Even if Hollis told her tomorrow that she was officially divorced, there was no guarantee that Professor Clarke still wouldn’t fail her.

The last few students found a seat and settled in for the lecture. A few moments later, the side door opened, but it was a red-haired woman who opened her laptop and plugged it in before dimming the lights. Kate pulled up her schedule on her phone. Had they changed the rooms again? She scrolled down to her class. No, this was it.

She looked up to see the slides illuminating the room, and the woman adjusted the microphone before she spoke. “Hello everyone. My name is Professor Fagan. I’ll be taking over this course in place of Professor Clarke.” A hum of whispered conversations spread throughout the room. “Please,” she said, waiting for the noise to die down, “Stop by my office if you have any questions or concerns. But for now, let’s get started.”

Kate tuned out what her new professor was saying, her mind jumping to a conclusion that she really wanted to be true. Less than five minutes later, she gathered her things and slipped out the door, her phone already in her hand.

She called Hollis who answered on the second ring. “Hi,” Hollis said. Her voice always managed to lift Kate’s mood.

“Hey, are you free to talk?”

“Hm. I’m between meetings.”

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“Uh...” Kate didn’t know how else to say it other than to blurt it out. “Did you... Did something happen? I’m back at college today, and he’s not.”

She could hear the smile in Hollis’s voice. “I told you I would take care of it.”

“But...” Kate closed her eyes, falling back against the wall. She couldn’t help imagining that Hollis had blackmailed him right back, and she worried about the potential consequences.

“It’s nothing illegal, if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m not a ganster.” She laughed softly. “I’ll tell you about it in person.”

“Tonight? Come by my place?”

“Sure.”

They said goodbye, and Kate needed another minute before she went back inside, her heart pounding in her chest as she dared to hope that the worst of all this was finally behind them.

34

“Champagne?” Kate asked when she opened the door and saw Hollis standing there with a bottle in her hand.

“Why not?” she asked with a smile. “We’re celebrating.”

“Come in,” Kate said as her lips slid into a smile. She led them into the kitchen and brought two glasses over.

Kate leaned in, kissing her for the first time in two weeks, and Hollis melted into her. Her heart fluttered as Kate’s soft lips met hers.

When Hollis pulled away, she looked into Kate’s eyes, a mixture of relief and desire mirrored back at her. She picked up the bottle and popped it open, catching the cork before it could do any damage and poured out two glasses.

“How are we able to celebrate?” Kate asked as Hollis handed her a glass. “The suspense is killing me.”

Hollis smiled. “First of all.” She swallowed. “I mean it when I said we’re celebrating.” She lifted her glass. “To fresh starts.”

Kate returned her smile as she looked away, recognizing the words she’d said to Hollis that first weekend. “To fresh starts,” she said as she met Hollis’s gaze.

Hollis took a sip, savoring the crisp, refreshing taste of the champagne, but she couldn’t keep Kate waiting any longer. “Will we sit down?”

They went into the living room and sat down, and Hollis took another drink before leaving her glass on the coffee table and reaching for Kate’s hand.

“I asked the private investigator I hired to send me everything he had. All the photos. And I asked him to identify the women in those photos. Then I asked him to follow him again. So then I had even more photos, more names,” Hollis said with a sigh. “I sent them all to the head of the psychology department saying that with a little digging it shouldn’t be hard to see just how brazen Professor Clarke has been over the years when it comes to following the rules set out by your college. There’s a very

clear no dating policy between students and teachers, and it's been in place for years. I sent it from a new email address I just set up. Nothing to do with me. And I didn't hear back until yesterday. That he was being put on mandatory leave pending a full investigation."

Kate let out a breath. She left her glass on the coffee table, her eyes fluttering closed. "I don't believe it," she said, barely above a whisper.

"He's not coming back, Kate. Not with all the proof I gave them, and like I told them, if they need to, I'm sure they can go back and find more. What a fucking idiot," she said, shaking her head. "I'm moved on from feeling betrayed to being absolutely sickened. And I'm so glad that it's come to this. He shouldn't be teaching."

Kate blinked back tears. "I don't think I've ever felt this relieved. This happy."

"There's more good news," Hollis said with a smile, her heart beating faster.

Kate looked at her in disbelief. "Tell me."

"I spoke to my lawyer today." Hollis was the one blinking back tears now. "It's official. As of this morning, I'm no longer married."

Kate simply stared at her before pulling her into a hug. Hollis breathed in the familiar citrus scent of her shampoo, hardly believing that she was finally free.

Hollis lifted her hand to Kate's cheek, guiding their lips together. Hollis kissed her slowly, and it wasn't long before Kate pushed her back against the couch, climbing onto her lap and straddling her.

Kate ran her fingertips along Hollis's jaw. "I'm so happy for you," she murmured before leaning in and kissing her.

Hollis sighed into the kiss, and when Kate's tongue danced with her own, she could feel it everywhere. The last two weeks had felt like months, and she couldn't wait to get her hands on Kate again.

Kate's hands were on the buttons of her blouse as she blindly worked them open, seemingly unwilling to break their kiss to do it properly.

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A soft laugh bubbled up from Hollis's throat when Kate cursed, unable to get beyond the third button.

Hollis broke the kiss and took Kate's hands in her own. "I have something else I want to tell you," she said, looking up at Kate, her hair tossed over one shoulder, her cheeks flushed.

"There can't be any more good news," Kate said with a smile.

"There is." Hollis's thumb lazily caressed Kate's skin as she kept a hold of her hands. "I'm going to view a house tomorrow evening. Are you free?"

Kate lifted an eyebrow. "Yeah... You want my opinion? You're the expert?—"

"I don't want your design ideas. I want to know if you could see yourself living there," Hollis said with a smirk, her words lingering in the air between them.

Kate's mouth fell open. "I don't know what to say. I mean, I didn't think today could get any better."

Hollis reached up to brush a lock of hair away from Kate's eyes. "I'm tired of wasting time."

Kate closed her eyes, leaning into Hollis's touch. "Stay with me tonight," Kate whispered when her eyes fluttered open.

"I was hoping you'd ask me that." Hollis slid her hand under Kate's hair, hooking it

behind her neck as she pulled her down into a passionate kiss.