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“I’m fired?” Kiera Simmons’ world tilted off its successful axis.

“That sounds so ugly.” Margaret, the Paisley, Inc. CEO, crossed her legs and leaned back in her leather chair, tapping her fingertips together. “Since we’re paying out your contract, we prefer to call it a separation. In light of the ongoing investigation, we believe your reputation is no longer conducive to representing our fashion line. I’m sure you understand.”

Kiera stared at her. Understand being fired? “I wasn’t involved in any of it.”

“And we’re glad about that, of course.” Margaret’s silken voice oozed condescension. “However, when we signed you as our fashion spokesmodel, we were clear your behavior both on and off camera must be above reproach.”

Her dark eyes narrowed. “We’re dealing with impressionable young women, Kiera. Being connected to someone like Thomas Ramsey was a poor decision that turned out to be very unpleasant for all of us.” She frowned over black Armani glasses. “I pushed to get you signed because I thought you were above this sort of behavior.”

Being duped by someone I cared about was bad behavior? The walls of the sterile office seemed to inch closer. Kiera lifted her chin, her breathing uneven. “You’re right. I was as naïve as the rest of his constituents to think he truly had everyone’s best interests in mind.”

Margaret’s red lips quirked. “Your focus should have remained on your job.” She slid two sheets of paper across the gleaming desk. “Now if you’ll sign both of these, we can all move forward.”

“Termination Agreement” glowed red at the top of each page. Kiera clamped her hands together in her lap and leaned back. If Christine were here, she’d know what to do, but her former agent was halfway around the world on her honeymoon.

I didn’t do anything wrong! The burn in her chest flared as the letters blurred. *They can’t do this.* Thomas’s actions had humiliated her on a national level, put her private life under a microscope, and almost landed her in jail. Now they were costing her the only job she knew how to do.

“I’m the best spokesmodel you’ve had.” She leveled defiance on the woman who at one time had been her champion. “My ads brought in a fifteen percent revenue increase this year

alone.”

Margaret dipped her head. “But now that your name is associated with the...incident, we’re hoping we don’t lose that ground. The Board has decided that putting a fresh face to this next campaign may prevent that.”

Kiera blinked. “What?”

“We signed Fiona for the upcoming series.”

A strange buzzing filled her ears. “But we finished the first shoot for the campaign last month. Everyone said it’s the best we’ve done. *You* said it.”

“Fiona will do a wonderful job as well. She’s a young, fresh face.” Margaret leaned forward and clasped her hands on the desk, stilted sympathy on her powdered face. “Kiera, I know this is difficult for you, but you’ll be free to try something new and...different.”

The walls inched closer. Margaret’s cloying perfume choked the air from the room. So this was it? Tossed aside like last year’s fashion?

The phone intercom chimed once and Margaret pressed a button. “Yes?” “Your two o’clock is here.”

“Thank you. I’ll be just another minute.” She extended the pen to Kiera. “It’s time for all of us to move on.”

The craziness that had erupted with Thomas’s arrest four months ago had hounded Kiera to this moment. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. She scribbled her signature on the papers and shoved them back across the desk.

Margaret folded one and slid it inside an envelope. “This is your copy. And the remainder of your pay. You must vacate the apartment by this Saturday, May 31st.”

The apartment? Nausea churned. Of course they’d boot her out. First the job, then her home. Did they want the clothes off her back too?

Margaret stood, her gaze lifting Kiera out of the chair onto stiff legs. “We appreciate the work you did on behalf of Paisley, Kiera. We wish you the best in your future endeavors.”

Moments later Kiera stood on the busy Manhattan sidewalk outside the fashion agency’s headquarters, squinting against the spring sunshine. Envelope clutched in her fist, she shivered in the breeze, jostled by people hurrying past.

Traffic crawled along Fifth Avenue, horns blaring, cabbies shouting and gesturing at each other. Tempted to make her own gesture at the glass office building that loomed over her,

she gripped the envelope tighter. Her father had taught her better than that.

After Thomas's arrest, she'd been pursued by paparazzi, given countless statements and depositions, and taken to occasionally wearing disguises in public. The sense of doom that had lurked at the edge of every day enfolded her, pushing her off balance. Legs trembling, she looked around for a bench, for something to stop the free fall.

"That's her!" The girlish squeal scraped across her skin.

Not now. Kiera slipped her sunglasses on and turned away from the voices, wobbling a few steps before a touch on her arm stopped her, followed by a hesitant, "Excuse me?"

With a tiny sigh, she flipped the internal switch and let her face light up, turning toward the voice. "Yes?"

Three teens stood plastered together, arms linked, wide-eyed with excitement. Had she ever been that young, that awed by celebrity?

The tallest girl had a toothy smile. "Are you Kiera Simmons?"

She had been an hour ago, but now... She pulled on her professional face, hoping her smile was more than a grimace. "Yes, I am. Who would you lovely young ladies be?"

It seemed impossible but they squeezed together even tighter in a fit of giggles. Dressed in fashionably ratty jeans and ribbed camis under lightweight hoodies, they could have stepped out of one of Kiera's own ads.

"I'm Anna," the tall one answered. "This is Jamie and Mia. We just wanted to say we love your work."

"Your Paisley pictures are awesome," Jamie gushed. She rummaged through her colorful Paisley backpack and pulled out a magazine, folded open to Kiera's photograph. A deep pink infused her freckled face as she held it out. "Would you, maybe, sign this?"

"I'd love to." Stuffing the crumpled envelope into her purse, Kiera accepted the magazine and neon pink pen and glanced at the ad before signing her name to the bottom. Who was that girl with auburn hair, heart-shaped face, and light dimple in her chin? The smiling, airbrushed exterior masked emptiness inside.

Ignoring the burn in her eyes, she handed the photo and pen back to Jamie. "There you go."

The girls studied her signature, dancing with delight. Anna looked from Kiera to her friend. "Jamie's hair is almost the same color as yours."

Her friend's blush deepened as she wrapped a strand of dark red hair around her finger.

"You have beautiful hair, Jamie." Kiera forced a smile, the tremble in her legs threatening to dump her on the sidewalk. She needed to breathe. To go back in there and fight for her job. Or find a place to hide from her life. The free-fall sensation made her sway.

"Doesn't Paisley have the coolest purses?" Anna asked, then frowned. "But my mom won't let me wear the clothes yet. She says they're for older girls."

"How old are you, sweetheart?"

Anna stood taller and tossed long brown hair. "Fourteen. In three months. That's old enough to wear their stuff, right?" She released a short breath and deflated. "I don't wanna look like my kid sister. Like you said in the magazine, the right clothes can change who we are. And I want to look glamorous and beautiful like you."

I said that? The pleading in the girl's eyes touched something deep inside Kiera's battered soul. There was nothing glamorous about her life. Especially now. And being fashionable only went so far. To be thirteen again with a chance to do it over—do it right.

"You know what, Anna? It's *not* the clothes or makeup that make you beautiful." She pulled her sunglasses off and looked at each earnest face, willing them to believe her words. At some point she'd stopped believing them herself. "It's who you are inside that matters. *That's* what makes you special. Don't ever let other people tell you who you are."

The tremble intensified. "I have to run, girls. I'm so glad we met. Take care, okay?"

"Wait! Could we take a picture with you?" Anna held a sparkly red iPhone.

Kiera hesitated, then nodded. This might be the last time anyone asked. "That would be fun."

The girls squeezed close, surrounding her with giddy excitement and the fruity aroma of body wash and hair gel. Anna extended her arm and snapped the selfie.

"Thank you!" She threw her arms around Kiera. "Thanks for talking to us. You're really nice."

Kiera hugged each girl, then signaled a cab. Once inside she managed a wave and sagged against the backseat. Tears blurred her view of New York. The bright lights and endless possibilities, intoxicating when she'd arrived to start modeling eight years ago, now suffocated her.

She folded her arms tight and closed her eyes. It was time to go home—to Minnesota, to

find out who she was away from the lights and cameras. The idea was more terrifying than facing hordes of paparazzi had ever been.

That evening she left a voice mail for Christine with a brief explanation of what had happened, finishing with “I’m hoping this will give us a chance to work together again.” Her bravado disconnected with the call. It had been three years since she left Gritz, and Christine, for the Paisley dream job.

Too humiliated to contact anyone else, she passed the rest of the evening in silence as she stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows, watching the sun set on the greenery of Central Park.

Over the next few days, Kiera stormed through the spacious apartment, slamming personal items into boxes she’d gotten from the doorman, telling her plants just what she thought of Margaret, Thomas, and the mess she was in. They listened stoically, though she half-expected them to shrivel up in boredom from her unending rant.

On Friday morning, after another fitful sleep, Kiera rested against the chic couch cushions, fingers wrapped around a steaming mug of hazelnut coffee. The firing still didn’t make sense. Following the flight of a distant plane, her eyes narrowed. Was Thomas somehow involved? An unwelcome memory stopped the breath in her throat.

Standing in the courtroom two months ago, Thomas had turned his back to his lawyer and leaned toward her. “I don’t know what you think you know, Kiera, but I suggest you keep it to yourself.”

She’d lifted her chin in the face of his veiled threat and crossed her arms, thankful there were no cameras in the courtroom. “Unlike you, I prefer the truth.”

His eyes took on a hint of steel. This wasn’t the same man who nearly a year earlier had charmed her into a high-profile relationship. “I’d be careful with that attitude, Miss Spokesmodel. It could end your successful career.”

She pushed the memory away and sipped her coffee. “God, I know I haven’t made time for you lately,” she whispered, “so maybe you don’t have time for me but...what do I do now?”

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A smattering of applause followed the last chords of the song. “Thank you. You’ve been a great audience.” *All twenty of you*. Peter Theisen squinted to see past the stage lights from his piano bench. “I appreciate you stopping by the Maxim Theater onboard the *Royale* to hear me tonight. I’m sure the ship’s casino is calling to you, so here’s my last song.”

He ran his fingers over the ivories. “I wrote this for my Gram. I miss her like crazy.” He forced a smile. “This is ‘Pinecones and Clover.’ I hope you enjoy it.”

The song stirred bittersweet memories of life at the cabin—sunlight dancing across the lake, the lonely call of a loon, shooting stars in a black sky. He’d sung the familiar words almost every night for the past six months, but the melody still evoked her smile of encouragement. No one had believed in him more.

The last notes faded into applause. “Thank you. Enjoy the rest of your evening aboard the *Royale*. Goodnight.”

As the small crowd dispersed, a white-haired couple stopped at the edge of the stage to shake his hand and share memories of their favorite songs, a few of which Peter had sung. Hearing them compare his music to Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, and other crooners from that bygone era sent a thrill down to his scuffed dress shoes.

Most of the people who visited his show were friendly, occasionally boisterous, and often tipsy. At the end of long days in the sun, they needed a few drinks and a chance to relax. More than once he’d put people to sleep. He chose to take it as a compliment.

The couple moved on and Peter collected his cheat sheets. Landing this cruise line job had seemed like an answer to prayer after years of doing landscape construction and singing in coffeehouses and dinner clubs. He lived to sing, to make people smile, but twenty-three weeks of the same gig six nights a week had worn him down.

He swayed with the gentle motion of the ship. In eight days he’d be back on land, figuring out what to do next. The thought of another summer hauling landscape boulders made his back ache. He could only hope Bill had something else planned. That’s what agents were for, weren’t they?

“Nice show, man.” A stocky, balding man with a warm smile hopped up on the stage and

held out a hand.

“Thanks. Glad you enjoyed it.”

“I’ve enjoyed all of them, actually. I sat in on one part or another every night this week.”

Peter grinned and released his hand. “Couldn’t find anything better to do?”

The man chuckled. “Actually, I made a point of stopping in. I’m Mark.”

“Peter. Obviously.” He gestured to a table beside the stage and they settled across from each other. “I appreciate repeat customers.”

Mark leaned forward, elbows on the table. His round, bearded face was sunburned, his nose peeling. Green eyes smiled behind wire-rimmed glasses. “I like your voice and your style, Peter. You’ve got a great mix of original songs and classics with a contemporary twist. Very unique.”

“Thanks.” He never tired of hearing positive comments. Probably because he’d heard so few growing up. In his parents’ eyes, his dream of a singing career had never measured up to the medical and legal careers of his siblings.

“How many months have you been performing onboard?”

“Almost six. I’ve got one more week. I seriously need to regain my land legs.”

“My wife and I have been onboard for five days and I’m starting to feel that way,” Mark said with a chuckle. “Peter, I’m impressed with how you handle yourself onstage. You have a relaxed style that resonates with the audience. That’s not something you can force. Either they connect with you or they don’t. Yours do.”

Gram had told him to be mindful of the audience, that performing wasn’t all about him. “Thanks. You sound like you know the business.”

“I’m a music producer.”

“I see.” He’d met a music producer in the middle of the ocean?

“You don’t have any commercial albums out yet, right?”

“Just the demo. My manager said we’d work on it once I’m off the ship.”

“Who’s your manager? Maybe I know him.”

“Bill Djerf.”

Mark’s expression remained neutral. “A big name in the music industry.”

Peter dipped his head. So he’d been told and not just by Bill himself. “I signed on about eighteen months ago after he heard one of my coffeehouse gigs. He’s had me performing in

every possible venue ever since. Including this one.”

“A good way to hone your craft. You have amazing potential, Peter.” Mark settled back and cleaned his glasses with the hem of his polo shirt. “I’m always looking for new talent. I’d like to produce your first CD.”

“Seriously?” *Smooth, Theisen*. “Have you been producing long?”

The corners of Mark’s mouth twitched. “A number of years now. I think I’ve got the hang of it. Would you like to give my studio a try?”

“Sure!” His feet tingled. Good thing he couldn’t dance or he’d be on the table making a fool of himself. “I need to discuss it with Bill before I give you a firm answer, though.”

“Good idea.” Mark pulled a business card from his wallet. “Here’s my contact info. Talk it over and get back to me. If you’re interested, I think I could get you in around the first of June. I have a few other projects pending so if I don’t hear back from you in the next two weeks, I’ll move ahead with them.”

He stood and extended his hand. “I think you’ve got a great career ahead of you, Peter. Even if we don’t work together, I fully expect to hear your music on the circuit soon. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Peter watched him thread his way between the tables, then dropped back into the chair, studying the business card. *Mark Simmons, Simmons Music Production*. The name was familiar. Minneapolis, Minnesota? Gram’s image leaped to mind, and he smiled. Her cabin was a few hours north of there.

He pulled out his iPhone and Googled the studio. After several toe-tapping minutes waiting to connect, he skimmed the results, mouth open. No wonder the name sounded familiar. Mark Simmons had just received his 13th Grammy Award.

Eyes closed, Peter smacked his forehead. And he’d asked Mark if he’d been producing long. *What an idiot!* While he’d researched producers in Nashville and L.A., he hadn’t considered Minnesota. The list of studio clients punched the air from his lungs. *The guy who produces CDs for the amazing NightVision is going to produce mine?*

He shot to his feet, grabbed his folder and hurried out of the empty theater. If he was recording a CD at SMP, he’d better be ready. He needed to write more songs. Practice every free minute. And revisit the song he wrote for Gram before she died. That *had* to be on his first CD.

Taking the narrow crew-only stairs two at a time, he spoke his promise aloud. “Just a

little longer, Gram, and I'll prove to everyone you were right to believe in me."

Kiera slung her bag over her shoulder and faced the townhouse as the cab drove away with a spray of gravel. The flight home to Minnesota had been three hours of turbulent emotions. She stood still and pulled in a breath of crisp, late evening air. Spring in Minneapolis meant the sweet aroma of lilacs, stars winking through budding tree branches, the gentle music of crickets. And peacefulness.

No car horns or neon lights. No crowded sidewalks or nonstop, pulsing energy. Every time she came home, she was reminded of how different this place was from Manhattan.

Being the Paisley spokesmodel had kept her living in New York far more than here with Terese. She'd been a lousy part-time roommate, but having this safe haven had ensured her sanity amidst a crazy life. A tiny smile touched her mouth. This was where she needed to be now as she decided what to do next.

Colorful ceramic pots overflowing with petunias, geraniums, and greenery filled the townhome's landing and dotted the stairs. Her smile widened. Yet again, Terese's green thumb welcomed her home.

She started up the sidewalk pulling a carry-on stuffed with the few things that hadn't fit in the boxes she'd shipped home yesterday. When she found the strength, she'd get rid of whatever held bad memories. Which would be most—

The front door flew open. "Girlfriend, it's about time you got here."

Kiera returned her best friend's enthusiastic hug. "Sorry for showing up so late, Tess."

Terese Matsuyama stepped back, hands on her hips, and grinned. "Since when is eleven o'clock late for you New York types? I'm just glad you've shown up period. Here, let me take the carry-on. Ooo, nice purse. Is that a Burberry?"

"Yup. Want it?"

Laughing, Terese led the way inside. "Oh, right. Like you'd let go of something that gorgeous."

Kiera dropped the shoulder bag in the entryway. "I don't want it." If only she could shed the memories as easily.

Her gaze roamed the familiar living room. Contemporary with Asian accents. A floral aroma tinged with citrus. Instrumental music in the background, candlelight casting a gentle

glow. She sighed. “Wow, it’s good to be home.”

Terese stood the carry-on in the middle of the Oriental rug and folded her arms. “I was stunned when you called to say you were moving back. I can’t wait to hear what happened to tear you away from the Big Apple.”

As dark, almond-shaped eyes searched her face, Kiera looked away. Still processing how her world had been knocked off its foundation, she couldn’t admit she’d been fired. At least, not tonight. Uttering the words would unleash emotions she wasn’t ready to face.

“But,” Terese said, “since you look wiped out, let’s get your stuff in your room so you can crash. We’ll talk in the morning.”

I’m home. The realization echoed through her mind, draping over the chaos like satin, soothing the burn in her chest. Throat tight, she croaked, “Thanks, Tess.”

Terese left her with a hug, closing the bedroom door with a quiet click. Kiera stood still for a long moment, listening to the silence of her life. She slid into her worn Paisley pajamas and went into the bathroom to wash her face. Patting her skin dry, she studied her reflection. Without makeup, hair in a disheveled ponytail, it was an unremarkable face. A smattering of freckles against pale skin, a longish nose, a high forehead. Dark eyebrows in need of tweezing.

What had been a face owned first by Glitz and then by Paisley was now the face of someone who had no clue who she was anymore. She smoothed moisturizer onto that face, the way she’d been instructed so many years ago, brushed her teeth the way she’d been told, then shut off the light. She climbed into bed and turned off the bedside lamp. In the darkness, she released the breath she’d held since the meeting in Margaret’s office and let the tears come.