

Just a Fling

by

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Chapter One

New York, NY—Present Day

Crawling around on her hands and knees in front of her boss, Dawn Mathison questioned her life decisions.

Again.

“I need that contract in thirty minutes,” Mr. White demanded.

Dawn scuttled over to another banker’s box and quickly shuffled through the stack of legal documents. “Maybe it’s on your desk,” she suggested.

Her stern, middle-aged boss was not amused. “Unacceptable, Ms. Mathison. Find it.”

“Yes sir,” she muttered but he’d already left the storage room.

Off to torture someone else.

Dawn tightened her ponytail and glanced at her smartwatch. Twenty minutes left. This was what hustling in law school had done for her. Landed her a prestigious job at the exclusive New York law firm of White & Halston LLP, where she now filed papers, scanned papers, and looked for papers. Not exactly like the legal dramas on TV.

“Lucky to be here, lucky to be here,” she chanted.

And she was lucky. White & Halston was the crème of the law firm crop. An old school firm known to Wall Streeters and Ivy Leaguers as the firm-of-choice for

prominent corporations and banks. White & Halston took “old school” seriously, operating the firm as if it were preserved in a 1990’s time capsule. While other firms wooed law students with trendy Gen Z perks—Advanced technology! Wellness and mental health days! No suits required! Work from anywhere!—White & Halston did the opposite. The firm’s prestige and outrageous starting salaries were more than enough to lure the best students from the top law schools.

And Dawn was the best of the best. Second in her class—second only to Mae Lin—and driven to succeed, she was an ideal associate.

Too bad she hated it.

But she just had to stick it out here for a few years. Then, with White & Halston on her résumé and her student loans paid off, she could write her ticket to anywhere, do anything. Her career was right on track; she knew exactly what she wanted and where she was going.

Right?

You’re twenty-five years old with over \$300,000 in student loan debt. So yeah, you’ll crawl around all morning until you find that freaking contract.

Dawn sifted through another box and struck gold. “Yes!” She pulled out the missing contract and raised the papers over her head triumphantly. Completing a task for Mr. White was like advancing to the next level in a video game when you had zero lives left.

On to the next bullshit assignment.

A sunny blond head popped through the storage room doorway. “Hey, you found it.”

Dawn grinned at her friend, Kurt, and lowered her arms. “Was I that loud?”

“Nah, I was passing by and thought I’d give you a hand. But it looks like you’ve got it under control.”

“You’re so nice, thank you.” At least she had some fellow associates to commiserate with, like Kurt. He’d clerked at White & Halston last summer, so he’d known what he was getting into. He’d given Dawn the scoop on the firm and her coworkers when they went through orientation together last month, and they’d become fast friends.

She stood and swatted at the dust balls clinging to her black suit. “I have to rush this to Mr. White and then get started on my memo for Mr. Halston. It’s due by five.”

“Get Halston’s memo in on time so you can come to happy hour with us. Remember, five-dollar pitchers until eight.”

Kurt winked and sauntered off. Kurt had told the firm he’d accept an associate position if he could work with Mr. Gandry instead of Mr. White. Mr. Gandry, who billed thousands of dollars an hour, was semi-retired, and spent most of his time at his vacation home in the Caribbean.

Kurt planned all the associate happy hours.

Dawn shoved the document into a manila folder and hurried toward Mr. White’s office. Happy hour wouldn’t be in her future if she couldn’t get through the mountain of work on her plate. She scanned the cubicles grouped along the long hallway to Mr. White’s corner office. Kurt may be coasting through life, but the other five associates in her first-year class looked as freaked as she felt.

Their group sat in what the other firm lawyers and staff called the “kindercubes,” a block of cubicles spaced in two neat rows surrounded by the windowed offices of

more seasoned attorneys. They were zoo animals on display. Fish in a fishbowl. At the mercy of any partner or senior associate who walked by.

They'd started together at the firm a month ago in July after taking the New York Bar Exam. Their entire careers hung in the balance while they waited for the results to be released in October, which was absolutely nerve-racking since the New York Bar was a notorious bitch to pass. As Mr. White liked to remind them, they were not real lawyers until they passed the bar, and they would *never* be lawyers at White & Halston if they had to retake the bar exam.

Waiting for the results was taking its toll on the kindercubers. And it was only August.

Dawn rounded the corner and passed the cubes where anxiety hung like a thick, dark cloud. Matt, hyped up on coffee, gave her a quick nod and zoomed past. Hannah scowled and banged on her keyboard; she still hadn't recovered from Mr. White accusing her of "lazy" research. Olivia mumbled into her headset, her face shuttering in sheer panic. Abbey stared off into space, semi-catatonic. And poor Natalie. She chewed on her hands so much they'd be down to stumps by Halloween.

This might not be Dawn's dream job—not even close—but Mr. White would not crack her.

"He's in the main conference room," Debbie, Mr. White's assistant, said. Dawn thanked her and turned on her black pumps to speed-walk down another hallway. She halted in front of the large conference room reserved for important client meetings.

Dawn grabbed the mahogany door's heavy brass handle. A round of masculine laughter erupted from inside the conference room. *Ugh*. Her clammy hands

fluttered to straighten the collar of her white blouse. *Come on, grow a vagina and get in there.*

She pushed the door open. Seven men, all in gray suits, sat around the large conference table. They stopped talking and stared when she entered the room. Mr. White beckoned her forward.

“Here’s the contract.” She handed Mr. White the folder and turned to leave.

He raised his hand, stopping her. “One moment, I need seven copies of this contract. And make sure you copy every page. Some of these are double-sided. And keep them in the right order.”

She pursed her lips and waited. Being treated like an imbecile in front of Mr. White’s clients was not the most ignominious thing to ever happen to her, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

She pasted a polite smile on her lips and surveyed the men around the table. One of them was Mr. White’s father, Bill White Sr., the firm’s founding partner. Well into his eighties and hunched with age, Bill White Sr. still came to work every day for a few key clients. How a man as lovely as Bill White Sr. had produced such a jerk for a son, she’d never understand. She gave him a big smile, which he returned through his oversized dentures.

She scanned the faces of the other men in the room but didn’t recognize them.

Until her gaze landed on a pair of beautiful hazel eyes.

Shock zipped down Dawn’s spine. A high-pitched sound rang in her ears, muffling Mr. White’s blathering. She reached out to grip onto something, anything, but there was nothing to steady her, so she

clasped her hands together instead. She swiveled back to Mr. White, who held the papers out to her with an expectant glare. A creeping heat suffused her neck and climbed up her cheeks. She had to get out of there. Now.

Why is he here?

“Here you go.” Mr. White’s annoyance prompted Dawn into action. She grabbed the papers like a lifeline. Like they were the only thing keeping her grounded in reality. She raced from the room, her stomach flip-flopping. The heavy door closed behind her with a *thud*. She drew a long, shaky breath.

What. The. Fuck?

The trip to the copy machine was an out-of-body experience; she barely registered walking. In front of the copy machine, Dawn punched the numbers by rote.

He’s not here. He’s not here.

Oh, God. Ice shot down her extremities and the hairs on her arms stood on end. The copy machine sputtered out the final page, but she didn’t move. She stood frozen like a rabbit caught in a snare.

She couldn’t face him again. No freaking way. Maybe Debbie could deliver the copies. But then Debbie would want to know why, and it would turn into a whole thing. Besides, Mr. White was waiting for *her*. Waiting with *him*. *Oh, God.*

Was passing out a viable option?

Oh, God. She had to do it quick. Get it over with. In and out. Ignore him.

Dawn threw her shoulders back and returned to the conference room. She opened the door and walked with purpose toward Mr. White, head held high.

Inside she was a freaking wreck.

Do. Not. Look.

But her heart and her brain weren't on the same page. She had no control. Against her will, her gaze slid to the right of Mr. White, and their eyes locked.

His stare was an atomic blast, and her legs wobbled from the impact.

Callan...

Those hazel eyes burned her.

"Your copies," Dawn muttered. She thrust the papers into Mr. White's hand and ran like holy hell from the room.
