

# Chapter One

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10TH, 2005

I open my eyes and it's morning. I'd dreamed about my mother—something I haven't done in a very long time—and the memory leaves me at a loss.

"You okay?" Jared asks groggily. He slings a warm arm over my waist and pulls me close. "You were talking in your sleep."

"What did I say?" I ask, stretching into him. I'm glad it wasn't my usual nightmare of him cheating on me with my co-worker.

"Nothing much. Just a bunch of groaning. Was it a sexy dream?" He kisses the back of my neck and my toes curl.

"No. Definitely not sexy." His lips drop away and there's a long silence as I stare out the window overlooking the parking lot. Frost eats at the corner of the windowpane. Ice splinters across the glass. I shiver.

"Last night was so awesome," Jared murmurs against my neck.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I like it better when you're wasted. You should let yourself go more often."

“Funny,” I say, but I know that it’s not. I wonder how many times I’ve gotten drunk with this man, and if losing count means anything significant. At length, I hear Jared’s rhythmic breathing. He can fall asleep faster than anyone I know.

I stretch into his warm chest, breathe in his familiar scent. I love when he stays the night. Even though we’ve been together for two years, he’s yet to say he loves me and won’t move in, claiming “a man needs his space.” Still, I know deep down he loves me.

The alarm by the bed goes off. Jared rolls over and yawns, then sleepily plods into the bathroom and turns on the shower. Unable to sleep, I reach over and pull open the topmost drawer of the nightstand. I remove a faded picture of my mother hugging my sister and me. Mom took it on Christmas day over twenty years ago in the backyard of our old house. She’d balanced the camera on a bench and set the timer so the three of us—the “Three Musketeers,” as she’d affectionately called us—could squeeze into the frame. She’d tickled us just as the flash went off, sending Dena and me into hysterics.

My throat tightens at the memory.

When the shower turns off, I shakily return the picture to the drawer. After a few moments, Jared emerges naked from the bathroom. He’s still the most gorgeous man I’ve ever slept. The sight of him sends a delicious thrill down my skin.

“Well, I’m off to work,” he says, pulling on his purple FedEx uniform. “You still on for Maggie’s tonight?”

“Sure,” I call from the bed.

“I’ll pick you up at eight.” He leans down to kiss my forehead.

I move to give him a more proper kiss when my cell on the nightstand erupts a ring and I give a start.

He laughs. “Shit, you’re jumpy.”

“How perceptive.” I glance at the caller ID. “It’s Jillian. I gotta take this.”

“No problem.” He reaches for his bag and steps into the hallway. “See you tonight.”

“Have a good day!” I say before bringing the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“I’m in his house!” hisses a garbled voice down the line.

“Hold on.” I cover the receiver as I call after Jared, “Care for you a lot, honey!” This is as close to “I love you” as we can get.

But it’s too late. The door has slammed shut and I’m speaking to air.

I sigh and drop my hand away. “Jillian?”

“Kimmy, are you listening? I’m in his *house!*”

“Whose house?”

“Adam’s! My boss! *Hello?*”

“You’re at his house? Is he there?”

“Sort of,” she whispers, and I hear bedsprings squeak as she shifts position. “He’s in the shower. I thought I should call you.”

“Call me? Why?”

“I found a picture of his wife.”

I close my eyes and sigh. For the past three weeks, Jillian has been having an affair with her married boss. Though I find the situation abhorring, I am duty-bound as her best friend to be her sounding board for as long as this lasts, which I hope isn’t much longer. “Well, that’s not surprising,” I say, pulling the down comforter over my chilled legs and leaning back against the pillows. “They are still married.”

“But listen to this, Kim...” She lowers her voice to a barely discernible whisper. “She’s gorgeous.”

“Gorgeous?”

“*Gorgeous.*”

“More than you?”

“I think so. The bitch.”

I rest my arm over my eyes, contemplating this in the darkness. “Why is he having an affair?”

“Because she treats him like shit.”

“Right.” I pause. “So, where is this picture?”

“It’s right here. Beside the bed. I’m looking at it right now.”

“That’s awkward. Why would he keep it there?”

“I don’t know. Last night, her eyes burned holes into my back. It took everything for me not to throw it at the wall.”

I grind my teeth. “Is this your first night at his house?”

“Yep. I tell you, this relationship’s moving fast.”

“Seems so. Now you’re his full-fledged mistress.”

“What!” Jillian cries, then immediately lowers her voice. “I’m not a *mistress*. I’m his *girlfriend*.”

“When you’re a married man’s girlfriend, I think that qualifies you as a mistress, Jillian.”

There’s a pause. “Well, I don’t like it. It sounds really seedy.”

Another pause. “Ahhh! I gotta go. He’s coming back.”

“Okay.”

“See you tomorrow, okay? Keep your cell on!” The phone clicks to silence.

*Good luck*, I think as I snuggle against the warm pillows with my arm still over my eyes, lulling in my half-awake, half-asleep delirium. Just as I’m drifting, the phone blasts a ring and my heart nearly punches out of my chest. I wish I had a button that could instantly end the person on the other line. “Hello?”

“Hey, Kim. Did I wake you?”

The sound of my sister’s voice sends gooseflesh up my arms. “No. I was just up.” I tuck a hand behind my head and search for words. “What’s new?”

There’s a beat of silence, and I instantly wonder what I said wrong. Then Dena says, in an unfamiliar voice, “Don’t you remember?”

I blink. “Remember what?”

“Oh my god, Kim. *Tell* me you didn’t forget.”

“Forget what?”

“Kim! I’ve only left you a million voicemails and e-mails. Jonathan and I need to be at the airport in two hours. We’re on our way to your apartment!”

“Today?” I stammer, having prepared myself for their arrival the following weekend.

“You forgot! Jesus, Kim! I just knew you would—”

“No, no,” I interject. “I didn’t forget. Ha ha. I sure fooled you.”

“You’re *kidding*?”

“Yeah,” I manage, forcing another laugh. “No, I remembered. Seriously. I was just messing with you.”

She gives a frustrated sigh. “So then you’re ready?”

I pause. “Ready for what?”

“Your apartment, Kim. Is it ready for Summer? Is there anything she can break? Stuff she shouldn’t get into?” She paused for an extended beat. “Did you read the manual I sent?”

“You bet,” I assured, casting a sidelong glance at the unopened binder Dena had overnighted weeks ago. A section even catalogues the hazardous substances found in most households. One glance had me terrified to drop anything into my kitchen sink.

“So it’s ready for two weeks with a six-year-old?”

I gaze across my cramped apartment. Jared’s pants and belt from the previous night lay crumpled on the floor, his cigarette butts filled the ashtray by the bed, and my black lace panties and matching bra are in a heap in a corner. I see patches of faded beige carpet through Jared’s collected debris. It isn’t nearly clean enough by my standards, but Jared didn’t care. He just piled his shit everywhere, and I never mustered the time or energy to sort through it. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Okay,” my sister says warily. “So then—”

“Dena,” I begin, flaring with panic. What the hell am I supposed to do with a six-year-old? My apartment’s dark by the time I get off work. There’s barely enough time for semi-decent sex before bed—and that’s only if I’m lucky. When did I last see Dena’s kid? Her fourth birthday party?

*Ugh. I’m a terrible aunt.*

“What?” Dena calls down the line.

The words burst out before I can stop them. “How do you know I can do this? I mean, Christ! I was the one who offed all our goldfish when we were kids, remember?” Totally true. Mom didn’t even trust me to feed Mocha, our chocolate-colored lab. Dena was the one who remembered to fill her bowl with fresh water and chow, take her out for walks, and play with her. I’ve always felt wary around anything more lively than a potted plant.

“Kim,” she says evenly, “the tickets are nonrefundable and we’re already here. You said you wanted to be a real aunt to Summer. This is your chance. Just keep to the manual and you’ll do fine. Remember, you can always call for my help, day or night. Okay?”

I hesitate. “Okay.”

“Okay,” she breathes. “We’ll be at your place in thirty minutes. Be ready!”

I set the phone down as nausea curdles my stomach. Somehow Dena always gets her way, regardless of how much it inconveniences everyone else.

I sigh as I plod to the bathroom and switch on the light. In the mirror, I catch my reflection. My legs are chubby and short and my stomach pooches over the elastic waistband of my pajama bottoms, making me look like a walking mushroom. My breasts are a sickly white because I’m too embarrassed to sunbathe topless. Long, mousy brown hair frames an oval face with mud-colored eyes. Thin lips frame straight teeth that are yellowing from the cigarettes.

Why had all the looks and bright future gone to Dena? I know that it's terrible harboring all this envy toward my sister, but I can't help it. We haven't been friends since we were kids, and now we're as close as distant cousins. I wonder if things'll ever change between us—and if I even want them to.

I run the water and brush my teeth, then dampen a towel and attempt to scour the mascara that's fused to my skin and gives me the appearance of raccoon eyes. Then I walk into the kitchen and open the fridge, pulling out a half-empty bottle of Absolut Vodka and a gallon of pulp-free orange juice. I mix the screwdriver on the counter next to a row of soiled dishes and beer bottles piled from the night before.

As I chug down breakfast and stare out into the distance, I can't help wishing I were an only child.