

One

The look on Mia's face isn't one of sadness or malice, just indifference. After all, this decision was a long time coming. Checking drawers, wiping the computer, taking her business cards and nameplate just to meticulously stack it into a box. It's not like she would use the business cards anymore but, it would be nice to have them. A reminder of her first big girl job.

Harlan and Harlan were obviously losing both money and clients. There is no way they'd be able to continue paying their own team just for clients to back out and find a better firm. So here comes the layoffs, which includes Mia and a few other associates, and next will probably be a meeting. Who'll be getting what case, new protocols and maybe the firm will reveal that at some point, they will be filing for bankruptcy. Shit, everyone knows that already, though.

Mia tosses the empty cup into the trash and picks up the box, glancing at the wall clock with a blank expression.

9:44pm.

Nothing like a few drinks to make her essentially forget that she has to log back in to indeed.com and start the dreadful job search. Maybe she'd even pick up a cute guy and relieve her stress in a *different* way. Even then though, she isn't all too in the mood to really socialize. So, she leaves her old office and trots down the stairs and out the front door, her silver Ford Focus coming into view. She sits the box down briefly, digging through her purse for the keys and pops the trunk. She practically tosses the box in the back, just to slide into the driver's seat.

One of her favorite bars is close by, a good middle point between her apartment and her best friend's apartment, just in case. She starts the car and drives the short distance, parking into the lot across the street from Backstreets. She's still dressed in her work attire, a white button down, beige pencil skirt and matching heels. Who gives a shit anyway? Turning the car off and stepping out, she pulls her bag across her body – that way she doesn't lose it – and starts walking toward the building. It doesn't look too busy yet for a Tuesday night, but there would probably be some kind of event starting later in the evening. A local band playing, comedy night, maybe even karaoke. She didn't bother checking the business page earlier.

The man at the door greets her and waves her inside, not really bothering to check her ID for the 50th time. Mia strolls in, the overhead lights dim, the dance floor glowing with a subtle amount of fog, and the string of lights around the bar greet her warmly.

She takes a seat at the bar, waving down her favorite bartender. It helps that he's ok-looking too.

“Hey Mia. Good to see you.”

She hums, “Always good to see you. Got any specials tonight?”

“Well, it's always ladies night when you're around.” he winks.

She laughs him off, “Whatever, man.”

“Having your usual?”

Resting her chin in her hand, she smiles, “You know me so well.”

He leans down to grab a glass and fills it with ice before setting it back on the counter.

“You never show up like this. Just come back from work?”

“Yeah”, she replies, watching him pour at least four shots of rum into the glass, “had some layoffs at the firm and of course I was one of them.”

He frowns, “Shit, sorry about that.”

“It's fine, I already freaked out about it a week ago so packing my stuff wasn't too much of an emotional event.”

He tops the glass off with coke and two lime wedges before sliding it to her, “Still. Losing your job will always suck.”

“I'm sure there are other firms looking to hire for diversity or some shit.” she jokes, taking a sip of her drink.

“Well, you know I'm here for you if you ever wanna talk about it.”

“I know. Thanks, pookie.”

He smiles and winks at her before walking off, taking orders for other patrons lingering at the bar. She isn't *terribly* oblivious to social cues, but nothing will fly over her head faster than romantic advances. At least, ones she didn't initiate. Plus, the bartender might have a girlfriend already at least. He isn't bad looking but he also isn't Michael B. Jordan levels of attractive. Let's just say, the bartender is...medium ugly and not *her* type of medium ugly.

She sighs before taking her phone from her purse just to swipe through Tinder. Which always proves to be *less* than fruitful. She takes more than a sip of the drink, almost dedicated to being tipsy enough to think someone on the app is cute, but to no avail. She

switches to Facebook, shares a few posts, likes a few friends' pictures before moving to Snapchat. Spacing out while the stories of her friends - and people she hasn't talked to since high school, whoops - flashes back to back on her screen. She finishes off her drink and looks up from her phone, the bartender already switching the empty glass to another full double rum and coke with extra lime.

"Thanks. You spoil me."

"Anytime, Mimi."

"Ugh, you know I hate that name."

"It's cute so it fits you."

She laughs, "Whatever."

He walks off again, leaving her to her devices as she keeps scrolling. As more people walk in, the clashing perfumes make her wrinkle her nose between sips. When all else fails, guess other people cover up their lack of personality with Drakkar Noir. She tries Tinder again, still not finding anyone worthy of holding an actual conversation. The action feels like opening the refrigerator after closing it, hoping something new will appear. Everyone's the same, personality wise or even *visually* the same. It feels like a cruel joke with how exhausting it is to find someone unique and challenging. Mia groans once again before shoving her phone back in her purse entirely. Online dating isn't really her forte, *obviously*. Taking another sip of her drink, she stands from the bar stool, taking a deep breath in preparation for the next attempt at socialization. Others gather at the bar and everyone else seems to be gravitating to the dance floor, a local DJ playing songs that Mia actually likes. So, two double rum and cokes on an empty stomach is all it takes for her to start dancing, the anxiety leaving her body and confidence taking its place. Her heart thrums in her chest, the tingling in the tips of her fingers, it's all so exhilarating. It's like she didn't lose her job, like she has to be at the office in the morning with a killer hangover, reminiscing of a night well spent.

Or she's just tipsy.

Xavier slides into his car with a deep sigh. Another dinner with his parents which meant another night of being scolded for not having a girlfriend yet. Truth be told, he was fascinated with *some* women outside of work, picking up the routines to their days no matter how mundane, just to get a better idea of what he'd be working with. At the end of the day, it was never much. He loosens his tie before starting the ignition, the quiet hum of a brand new car. Well, kind of new. He only had his silver BMW for almost two weeks and he was already looking at newer ones in different colors. Well, that and a new Mercedes.

Tapping along the screen of the GPS, he wants the nearest bar. In addition to having a drink, maybe he'd come across another woman he'd like. Otherwise, he's *fucked*. Online dating he doesn't understand plus it's really aimed toward the younger crowd. And he knows for a fact, you can make up whatever you want on the Internet and he's not a big fan of that. After all, seeing someone in their element, without screens holding them hostage, makes the chase even more thrilling.

Xavier starts his navigation and heads out 25 minutes from his parents estate, some place called Backstreets. Even though it's relatively close to where he lives, he's never heard of it. Again, it's not like he gets out much away, at least without a *purpose*. Low jazz reverberates through his car, something to bring him down from the suffocating tension of his childhood home. He spent years gathering information about his parents, what they liked or disliked, their past lives before meeting, their friends and former colleagues, he even went as far as listening in to secrets no one else was supposed to know. While he kind of feels bad about what he retained, but it would come in handy to expose the affairs and tax fraud against his parents one day.

Either way, he pushes the thought aside, keeping his eyes planted on the road. He isn't much of a drinker, but if it helps him ease his nerves right now then so be it. He taps his fingers to the music along the steering wheel, turning a sharp corner where bustling lights come into view. A crowd of people gathered at the entrance and the neon sign above it that held the name. Backstreets. He parks his car in the lot across from the building, turning off the ignition and taking a deep breath. This night can't get worse, right? He wills himself to get out of the car, locks it and beelines toward the entrance, somehow sneaking past the curious glances women – and even men – had. A waft of different smells hits him like a truck. Cologne, perfume, alcohol, body odor, is this normal for a place like this? Xavier clears his throat and approaches the bar, stopping mid-step to listen carefully to a nearby altercation.

“What the fuck is your problem? Did your parents teach you any manners? Don't fucking touch women without their consent!”

The southern drawl in her voice makes him turn his head. The man just barely sinks into himself under her gaze, but still attempts to hold some false bravado. Seems like he doesn't get yelled at often. Xavier smirks to himself, flagging the bartender for whatever top shelf bourbon they had, preferably neat. He sits on one of the open stools and continues to look on. She knows how to handle herself, almost like it isn't the first time she's had to put someone in their place.

“Sorry, jeez no need to be such a bitch about it, no wonder you're here alone.”

“McScuse me? You're here alone too, feeling up on random women!”

One of the bouncers steps into the mix, taking the man's arm and escorting him out. Her voice is loud enough to carry over the music, and he isn't the only one watching her. When both men pass him, Xavier can't help listen to him grumble racist and misogynist

things. It's beyond deplorable, and getting caught up in a potential assault charge is *not* on his agenda tonight.

She gets closer to him, and only then does he realize he's staring. She must have been here for a while, her steps almost as wobbly as a baby deer yet still kind of graceful in beige stilettos. She leans against the bar, not looking at him at all.

"What's your deal, douche canoe?"

That takes him out of his trance, along with her long eyelashes and faded nude lipstick.

"Sorry. Never been called that before."

"Do you always come to bars in a suit, staring at random women?"

Xavier chuckles, "I decided to try it out tonight, see if it'd work."

She scoffs and rolls her eyes, a drunken grin on her face, "Whatever."

He takes a swig from his glass, watching her small fingers wave down the bartender. He makes a note of that later, she likes rum and cokes with extra lime.

Once she gets her drink, she settles into one of the bar stools next to him, and his mind races with thoughts he couldn't fully pick apart yet, well, except for the fact she didn't yell at him. Xavier clears his throat, adjusting his tie.

"So, what do you do for work? Those are your work clothes, aren't they? They don't really look like bar attire."

She still doesn't look at him, her eyes scanning every bottle on the back wall, "Well, if you must know, I was a M&A at a law firm. But they made some budget cuts and with that I went with it."

Well, now *this* is getting interesting.

"Is that why you came out for a drink?"

"Are you gonna ask for my social security number next?"

"Well, if you're offering."

She laughs loudly, one that made the blood in his veins vibrate immensely and he smiles at her. She's witty and sarcastic, he definitely likes that.

"Fuck off."

Xavier finishes his bourbon, taking a card from his jacket pocket and placing it on the bar counter.

“If you're starting your job search soon, I'd advise you to check them out.”

She tilts her head to the side when she looks down, the card being matte black with silver writing. She chuckles and puts the card in her shirt pocket, finally turning her head to look at him. He drinks in her features, the curve of her full lips, her dark brown eyes that seem to pull him in, and even the diamond stud poking out from her nose.

“Yeah, sure.”

Xavier waves down the bartender, who gives Mia a look before looking back at Xavier, “What'll it be, sir?”

He chuckles, “Ah, no need for formalities. Just another neat bourbon and I can pay for her drinks.”

He and the bartender watch as Mia's eyes widen, her mouth stuck open as she tries to figure out what to say. Instead, she waves both of them off, “No, no that's not necessary!”

Xavier tilts his head to the side, admiring her panicked expression, “It's alright. I insist. I'd like to talk to you a bit more.”

She's silent for a few seconds, looking over at the bartender and then back to him.

“Alright, fine. Thanks.”

He hides the frown he sports as she averts her gaze. So, paying for her things is embarrassing? He finds it interesting, and it even gives him some kind of glimpse into her head. She's independent, it seems. Xavier takes his wallet from the pocket inside his blazer and offers his credit card to the bartender. He takes it out of his hands, his expression showing one of surprise. It's not everyday that people get to hold a metal American Express card.

Xavier watches Mia sip her drink, his eyes following the connection between her lips and the rim of the glass.

“So, which firm did you used to work at?”

“Um...nothing terribly big or anything. Harlan and Harlan.”

He clicks his tongue, “Ah, Harlan and Harlan. Been hearing a lot about them lately online. I personally think there's some truth to those articles.”

“Some truth?” she asks, finally turning to face him. He’s grateful, there's nothing more he wants to do than stare into her eyes.

The bartender comes back, bringing another drink for her and him respectively while sliding a clipboard to him, his credit card, a pen and a receipt attached.

“Yeah. Ever since they acquired a new partner, things started going downhill. I believe he was either involved with some kind of fraud or even a bad money laundering deal that fell through.”

She scoffs, “Wow, that's bold. Any reason why you'd believe that specifically?”

“I do my research.” he responds, taking a sip of his drink.

“Well, that's a helluva lot of research.”

“What can I say? I enjoy learning about new things.”

“Well, Mr. Enjoys Learning About New Things, what's your name? Unless you like my nickname for you more.”

He does, he *really* does. She's so witty he could combust, it's so rare to find these days.

“Xavier. And you, Ms. Skepticism?”

She laughs loudly and his heart beats faster, “Mia.”

“Nice to meet you, Mia. Short for anything?”

“No, thank god. It's simple enough.”

“Right, right. Makes me feel like my name's a mouthful.”

She shrugs, looking at him once again, “Yeah, you might be right. Let's shorten it to ‘Xave’.”

It's perfect.

“Alright, Xave it is.”

“So, where do you work? Clearly not Harlan and Harlan.”

“No, no. I work downtown, L.Delton and Associates.”

Mia gasps, “Oh shit! Isn't that the tall, fancy building?”

“You got it.” he remarks, finishing off his bourbon quicker than he expected. He honestly doesn't want this night to end, enjoying the butterflies in his stomach and the heartbeat of someone being hunted for sport. He has to see her again, he *has* to.

“Wow, bet it took a lot to get a position there. I wanted to try my hand at applying but, I don't know.”

“Why? Do you think you won't be good enough for the ‘tall, fancy building’?”

She giggles, “Oh shut up. No it's just...I don't know. Seems a lot more sophisticated than I am. I think I just fit better in smaller firms, you know?”

“I think you won't have a tough time there. I honestly think we need someone like you on our team.”

Mia raises a brow, “Oh really?”

“Yeah, someone full of wit, brings a different energy to an otherwise drab and monotonous environment. Plus, I believe you secured a lot of the cases at Harlan and Harlan? Am I right?”

She hums as she sips her drink, tapping her fingers along the wooden counter, “Maybe. Sure know how to boost my ego already, Xave. But if you work there and you're saying all this shit, guess I should give it a go.”

“Good”, he says, signing off on the receipt and putting his card back into his wallet, “Looking forward to seeing you there.”

Mia takes the card from her pocket as he stands, giving a small smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. That's weird. She flips the card over between her fingers as Xavier makes his way to the exit, his long black hair partially tied up in a man bun while the rest drapes down his back in such a mesmerizing way that Mia doesn't realize *she's* staring the entire time. She looks down at her half empty glass, shoving the card back in her pocket while committing his face to memory. If she had to guess, he's some kind of Asian descent. Fair skin, sharp jawline, lips that aren't too full but not too thin with a mysterious scar on the right side, upturned green eyes and bangs that barely cover his right eye. If the rest of the associates in the firm look just as good as him, well, she's got nothing to lose.

Even stepping outside into the chilly, fall weather, Xavier couldn't get his heart to stop pounding in his chest. Mia is perfect, in every sense of the word. At least in his own twisted mind. He can barely wait until his secretary gets the call from her, he'll have to instruct her to schedule an interview with Mia as soon as possible. Walking to his car, all he thinks about is subtle ways to find out more about her. Maybe offering her coffee during the interview? That way he knows what to fix when they spend breakfast together. He can offer to take her out to lunch on the second or third day of her working

with him. Xavier bites his lip in anticipation before slipping into his car, his mind reeling of possibilities to get closer to her.

After all, there's *no* way in hell he's letting someone so flawless slip through his fingers.

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