

Climax

The Publicist:

Book Three

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First book edition © 2015

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# 1

“Damn it!” Kate said louder than she’d planned. The guy on the treadmill next to her looked over. “Work,” she shrugged as she smiled at him. He turned back to his TV; he seemed annoyed. Kate could have sworn she saw some slight eye rolling. He wasn’t the only one. Couldn’t a girl get one hour alone in the gym without someone deciding they needed her right this minute? She wasn’t even a doctor like her brother; she was just a publicist. Well, now a publisher, and with that new title came a huge amount of added responsibility.

Her phone continued to buzz like it was alerting her to a four-alarm fire. She slowed down the treadmill and grabbed it. There were twenty text messages, all from her newly-hired publicist Annabelle. Mac kept insisting she not spread herself too thin. To his credit, Kate knew she couldn’t do it all on her own, so she finally gave in and started interviewing candidates. Annabelle had been at Random House for five years and had (according to her résumé) taken on some of her own titles independently, which meant that she managed the publicity and marketing cycle on a book from start to finish, handling things like advanced review copies, pre-launch media, and anything related to the launch and ongoing promotion of the book. Kate knew all too well how much work that involved. However, things were a bit different at Lavigne

House, Kate had warned her. This wasn't just an office job. A good publicist went on-site; a good publicist wasn't overloaded with seventy-five new titles a season like at other publishing houses. Kate would need more help or fewer titles. For the time being, Kate decided on the latter, but she knew that wouldn't always be the case. Often publishers made all of their money on one blockbuster. For Lavigne House that was Allan's last book: *After the Fall*, which had done exceedingly well—even beyond their expectations. The movie had earned two Oscars. The paperback had hit the bestseller list and was still in the top ten a year after its initial release. But that success would not last much longer. Lavigne House needed another bestseller, and soon.

Kate cycled through the text messages from Annabelle. It started with a cheery, "*I've arrived, everything is great!*" It was Annabelle's first in-person event for Lavigne House and she had assured Kate that she would be fine on her own. Still, Kate decided she would go down to the store after the signing started. You know, just to be sure.

The event was going to be big, or so Kate hoped. They had signed a book by Laurie and Adele, two gals who had been friends forever and then decided to turn their baking skills into profits. They became the biggest cookie company in the U.S., and even throughout having newborns and raising kids, then one going through divorce and the other grieving the death of a parent, they kept baking and inventing new recipes. Today was their signing at the Fifth Avenue Barnes & Noble. It was a big deal, and Kate had put a lot of faith in Annabelle. *Perhaps too much*, she thought, as she clicked through her messages.

Laurie and Adele's cookies were synonymous with some of the best baked goods in the country. But their baking talents didn't stop with cookies. Last year they were asked to bake a wedding cake for the President's daughter's nuptials, and then they were invited to attend the wedding. Shortly after that, Lavigne House signed them for their memoir, *Sugar and Spice*, which is what they jokingly called each other. The pre-orders for the book had been brisk, which was good. Not as brisk as *After the Fall*, but still good. The media had also been prominent with stints on *Good Morning America* (leading a fun baking class with the hosts), *The View* (cookies for the entire audience), and many, many radio shows.

As she cycled through the messages, they became more and more distressed. When she got to the last one, she jumped off the treadmill and raced to the showers. It read: *Authors screaming. Please help.*

## 2

Kate finished her shower in record time, threw her stuff in her bag, and left her hair to air dry. It wouldn't look pretty, but today wasn't a day for vanity. She would go in, fix whatever was wrong (hopefully without being seen by anyone), and race home to change into more appropriate new-author-book-signing attire. Annabelle sounded desperate, and Kate sent her a text, promising she'd get there as quickly as she could.

The gym showers were located below the lobby, and by the time Kate ran up the stairs two at a time she was sweaty again.

Kate nodded to the desk clerk, a perky blond with perky tits who probably had only to smile at a treadmill to get into shape while Kate spent hours on various relentless machines just to keep her late thirties figure in check.

"Bye, Katie!" the perky blond with perky tits waved as Kate practically flew through the lobby.

She pushed open the doors and was immediately assaulted by the heat; even this early in the day it was blistering. It promised to be another unusually hot day in the city—especially for mid-May. A string of three of them in a row had New Yorkers feeling testy. With temps in the high nineties, the A/C in most places, including the Y, was strained to the limits. The subways would be worse. Heat got trapped down there and mixed with the stale stench of body odor and urine. It was the least pleasant side of New York.

Kate pulled her phone from her purse, checking her messages again. Five more from Annabelle.

“Fuck,” she said and then slammed into a passerby, dropping the entire contents of her purse and gym bag all over the hot sidewalk. “Damn it!” she could see that she’d bumped into a man. “Sorry about that, sir,” she mumbled before she dropped to her knees to pick everything up.

“You seem in a hurry,” he said.

That voice.

It was unmistakable. Kate didn’t even look up. She was certain that her frantic mind was playing games with her.

“I’m really sorry,” she said again. This time she looked up to confirm it was just her imagination run amuck.

Instead, she found Nick Lavigne towering over her. The sun formed almost a halo behind his head, illuminating him like some Greek god.

“Nick?” she asked, almost in a whisper.

He only smiled.

Kate suddenly realized that she was kneeling, sporting wet hair, very little makeup, and the grungy outfit she'd worn to the gym. She also realized that the shower had been useless; she was sweating both from the sprint out of the gym and the scorching, humid weather. She did not look her best. Or, you know, how you'd want to look when you've just run into your old boyfriend. No, scratch that, your former fiancé. The one you dumped so you could go back to your once-married lover who dumped his wife so he could be with you. Well, it was more complicated than that. It always is. Nick had been her lifesaver when her entire life had fallen apart. She'd taken his ring, accepted his offer, then given it back.

Not her finest moment.

She stood up. "Nick," She said again. *Say something else, she thought, something brilliant, something witty about running into someone on the streets of New York. Maybe the line from Casablanca, 'Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world...' No, that wouldn't work. Still too soon to use that one.*

Nick was frowning. "Kate, are you all right? Can I help you collect your things?" A dog passing by with its owner sniffed her curling iron that had rolled across the sidewalk and almost peed on it. Kate hardly noticed.



“Eh, yeah, sure.” She bent down to grab the curling iron and a few other things that had scattered everywhere. She took a deep breath and stood up. “Sorry, I was just caught off guard. What are you doing here?”

He flashed her a broad smile, that brilliant Southern California-boy smile, his light green eyes almost sparkling in the sun. No one had the right to look that good.

“Good to see you, too.”

Kate shook her head, “I’m sorry.” She went to hug him and stopped short. What’s the proper greeting when seeing an ex fiancé? A hug? A peck on the cheek? She realized she wasn’t sure. She decided a peck was probably the safest route to go. It had been what, a year since she’d seen him? In his uncle’s apartment. That bitter cold day and their equally bitter encounter that had ended in tears, mostly hers.

Nick bent his head as she kissed him on the cheek. Her lips still sent a tingle down his spine. Had it really been a year? He quickly pulled himself together.

“I’m here on business, actually. Opening three stores—in Manhattan, The Village, and Brooklyn.”

Kate’s eyes flew open. “Wow, that’s great.”

“An investor came forward wanting to bring them to the east, so we’re giving this a shot. They’re slated to open in September.” He hesitated for a moment. “I hope you will come to the open house.” Nick stopped abruptly, looking off in the distance. “You and Mac of course.” He almost whispered Mac’s name. Saying it hurt more than he’d anticipated.

Kate suddenly felt nervous; this conversation was going in an awkward direction. She needed to change it, and fast.

“Sure, I’d love to. So, who is managing the stores in SoCal while you’re here?” *Great conversation shift*, she commended herself.

Nick swallowed hard. “So, I gather you’re married, or soon to be,” Nick nodded towards her left hand and the sparkle of her ring.

Damn it, there went her applause. She was slightly annoyed that he ignored her brilliant attempt to shift the conversation.

Kate licked her lips. “N-No, not yet.”

“Oh. When’s the date?”

“We haven’t set one. We’re waiting.” No, this wasn’t going well at all.

Nick cocked his head. “Waiting?” The word sounded uncomfortable and stupid.

*Waiting. For what? A sign from God?*

Kate nodded, for someone who worked with words every day, she was surely having trouble finding hers right now.

“Well, there’s been a lot going on.” It was a sad excuse and they both knew it. She was waiting, although why she wasn’t sure. Uncertainty perhaps? She insisted it was because she was so busy with Lavigne House and Mac, being Mac, didn’t push it.

He had told her, “I’ve been married before, Kate; I’m fine staying like we are. Marriage is just a state of mind and my mind is made up.” It was sweet and impossibly understanding.

Nick nodded. “Well, anyway, whenever it is I’m sure it’ll be great.”

Kate felt like she couldn’t breathe. She recalled an old publishing joke: The Past and Future walked into a bar, it was tense. She felt a bit like that now, tense and suffocating. Maybe it was the weather. Maybe it was the fact that her phone had been buzzing with messages the entire time. She knew that if she didn’t get to the bookstore, she might end up helping Annabelle hide a body instead of just fixing a signing. Or maybe it was the fact that her past had come back to haunt her, right there on a New York street.

“Nick, I’m sorry. I have to go.” Kate held up her phone, as if it was proof of her emergency.

He nodded and smiled again. “Of course. Good to see you, Kate. I’ll make sure to let you know when the grand opening is.”

She stopped for a moment, remembering a time when Nick had been her best friend. When something good happened, or even something bad, he was the first person she wanted to tell.

“I’ve missed you.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. She could hear the subway running beneath the sidewalk and suddenly wished the concrete would open up and drop her in front of a speeding subway train. It would have been less painful and awkward than this moment.

"I-I mean, we were friends..." Kate added, wishing someone would sew her mouth shut. Nothing that she added to the conversation at this point could help it.

"Yes, we were friends. Then we weren't." Nick spoke softly, but she could hear the slight bite in his voice. *Then we weren't, and it's all your fault.* He didn't say it, but he didn't have to.

"Right," she said quickly. "Well, I have to go."

"Take care, Kate." Nick turned and walked the other way, up Fourteenth Street and away from her. It was a relief that someone clearly more mature than she had ended the torture.

Kate walked towards the subway station. It was just her luck that in a city of two million people, she could run into the one person who could, with a simple word, make her feel like a complete dumbass. She ran one of the most successful companies in publishing, she had published a mega-bestseller, and none of it mattered. She'd broken Nick Lavigne's heart. Now, by sheer chance or some ass-kicking karma, she'd run into him. Not only that, but she remained unmarried, despite the fact that she'd raced from his arms into Mac's. It had been the right thing to do. She loved Mac. She adored Mac. Still, she wasn't married to him. She hadn't rushed to the altar.

*Waiting.*

They were waiting. For what? That ever-elusive sign from God? Angels from the heaven to come down and bless their union? Or maybe the sign was a chance meeting with a former fiancé who had been a nurturing, loving man. The man who had cared for her in her darkest hour and brought her back from the brink. Someone she had loved.

An author she once worked with wrote that love is never over, just over there.

As she descended into the subway, Kate realized how true those words really were.

By the time Kate arrived at the Barnes & Noble, her hair was dry and her composure somewhat back on track. The event, however, was not. A line of eager fans snaked around the building. Even in this sweltering heat, the crowds came out to see Laurie and Adele, their favorite pastry chefs.

As Kate walked in the store, she could hear the authors' screaming coming from the back of the store.

"I will *not* sign my book at the same table as you!" A feminine voice bounced off the store walls.

As Kate got closer, she spotted them through the open green room door.

"Your book? Without me you'd still be making Tollhouse crap. Maybe we should just tell everyone that you don't really know how to cook!" It was Adele who was screaming, her curly blonde hair flying around her head as if it, too, were enraged.

Kate was certain that if she could hear them, fans who were slowly starting to gather inside could, too. The media was also starting to set up their cameras and mics. A few brought lighting, which was being carefully placed around the signing tables. Just what she needed, a series of catfight pictures making the paper. Kate raced to the back of the store where she found a very pale Annabelle trying to soothe the battling co-authors.

"K-Kate, I'm so sorry. I'm so glad you're here." Annabelle was visibly shaking, "I tried to keep them in the back until we could figure this out."

Laurie and Adele were still screaming at each other, oblivious to anything but their own tedious argument.

Suddenly, Laurie grabbed a handful of Adele's long, black hair and started pulling. "I'm tired of finding your hair in our cupcakes!" she screamed.

"We need to get them out of earshot first." Kate stepped between the duo. "Ladies, let's go now. The media is setting up and they're going to hear you. This will only hurt books sales." Kate knew that uttering the magic words "book sales" would get their attention.

Laurie stopped mid-hair pull. "Fine," she said, letting her grip fall. "But I refuse to share a table with this bitch!"

"You're the bitch, you heartless diva!" Adele screamed and reached out a well-manicured hand to grab another clump of hair. What was with these two and hair pulling?

"Enough!" Kate had had it. It had been a long day and it was only ten a.m. "Get inside." Kate stood in the door to the green room and ushered them inside, followed by Annabelle who looked near fainting.

"Now, you two listen to me," Kate's voice commanded attention. "I'll get you separate tables on opposite ends of the store if you like. But you will go out there, you will stop yelling, you will smile and pretend that you worship the ground the other walks on. You will sign books and be charming, you will pose for pictures, and you will not yell, scream, call each other names, pull hair or any other protruding body part. Am I clear? You screw this up and there goes everything, including your career. Or maybe you'd just like to hand all of this success over to Debbie Fields."

Kate took a chance that the authors would never want to be on opposite sides of the store given that one might draw more of a crowd than the other. She knew setting up that way would be more of a problem, but she knew she had to get their attention.

Adele jutted out her chin. "We are better cooks." Laurie nodded. Kate knew their mutual hatred for Mrs. Fields was an odd, twisted uniting factor for them.

Whatever worked. She had an author event to do and books to sell.

"Fine. Whatever. Now get out there and smile. Hug each other, make some joke about being nervous and this is how you two vent. Understood?"

Both ladies nodded and began to straighten themselves up so they could face the crowd. Adele was digging around in her purse while Laurie applied her trademark bright red lipstick.

“Excellent. Then when we’re done here, we’re off to The University Club for a reception. I will expect you to be on your best behavior there, too. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” Adele said meekly, “We’re sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for me,” Laurie snapped.

Kate rolled her eyes. “Just get out there.”

She opened the door and Sugar and Spice breezed through, all smiles and giggles. When they got within eye-shot of their fans, they hugged. Kate had to admit, they were both good actresses. If the whole cooking thing didn’t work out, they might consider ladies’ wrestling. God knows it had worked out well for Stacy Keibler.

“I’m so sorry, Kate,” Annabelle said meekly.

Kate wanted to launch into her, to tell her that she needed to be able to handle something like this. Any seasoned publicist knew how to manage the author ego, or at least soothe it. She was hired to make Kate’s life easier, but so far that wasn’t happening. But Kate didn’t feel like getting into it. Running into Nick had taken the wind out of her ability to reprimand anyone at this point. What she wanted was a cosmo and a good friend.

“Next time, manage this better,” she hissed.

Annabelle gave her a soft nod.

Kate pulled out her phone and sent a message to Grace: *Let’s meet for a drink later.*

Grace wrote back: *I hate texting, stop it.*

*I ran into Nick.*

*I’ll be there.*

Nick had expected to see a lot of people when he came to New York, but Kate wasn't one of them. Running into her had been jarring. When she had left him, his entire world had shifted towards work. He spent endless hours at his health food stores, doing whatever work he could find—even stocking product. On more than one evening, the stocking crew would arrive to find most of their work had been done. Nick found that work kept his mind from drifting to Kate, wondering what she was doing in her new life with MacDermott Ellis.

The winner.

It sounded so stereotypical, but in a man's head there were winners and losers. It was that simple. Mac had won. He had lost.

So he worked and worked and worked. Nothing else took priority.

He hated being home, alone in a house he'd once loved so much. The loss of Kate had echoed through it. It's amazing how love can decorate a home, and when it's gone, it's as though every single picture and painting has been ripped from the walls, leaving just empty hooks where memories used to be.

He missed the days when she'd been there, working on his uncle's book, getting it published. He missed sharing the wins with her during her comeback to publishing. It had been exhilarating in ways he hadn't ever imagined. But most of all, he missed making love to her until late in the night and again early in the morning, when the sun had barely nudged the moon out of the sky. The loss and loneliness clawed at his heart. There had been other women, of course—nameless women who just wanted sex. That was fine. That was all he wanted. No ties,

no talk of the future. Just someone he could bore into with his desire and forget, for a moment, that he'd lost the best and brightest thing he'd ever known.

During this time Nick's only sibling, his much younger sister Vivienne, had emerged from her many (many) travels. Their parents had worried that Vivienne was a lost soul, too easily distracted. When they died in a car accident seven years before, Nick took over a more parental role for his sister. Vivienne had been just fourteen when they died and Nick became her guardian. He would attend all her school events, help her with homework, shuttle her to friends' houses. He wasn't keen on her getting her driver's license too early and even when she did, he wasn't keen on letting her drive in LA traffic. Then came the really difficult time: Vivienne started dating. It was all Nick could do not to have his buddy down at the San Marino police station run a background on all of the guys she was interested in. He was convinced that at least one of them must have a record.

His sweet, outspoken sister was a surprise to all of them, especially to Nick, who was sixteen at the time she was born. He was well into his life in high school, his friends, and sports when Vivienne arrived. She was all wrinkly and toothless, with wide eyes and with bouncy, red ringlets. He loved her immediately. From that moment on they'd been inseparable. But the loss of their parents at the hands of a drunk driver had been too much for her. Although Nick had pushed her towards college and even paid her tuition in advance, Vivienne had become a scattered wanderer, taking trips to far-flung countries to volunteer to help dig wells, feed starving orphans, or whatever she felt drawn to—all of which made Nick exceedingly nervous. But by then she was eighteen and there wasn't much he could do to stop her, except maybe lock her up in his house—something he considered on a daily basis.

When Vivienne found out that Kate had broken her engagement with Nick (and it was almost six months before Nick told her), she got on the next plane and had been with him ever since. When the stores in New York became a real thing and it was necessary for Nick to move there temporarily, she insisted on joining him. Nick had been elated. Having his sister nearby had been one of the best things that had happened to him in a long while.

Nick pushed the key into the lock of their shared New York apartment and opened the door. From the hallway he could see Vivienne's feet propped up on the top of the couch.



“Viv!” he called out.

She swung her feet down and stood up, her red curls bouncing around her head. They bore almost no resemblance to each other, except they shared the same green eyes and athletic build. But that was there it seemed to end. Vivienne was tiny, just a whiff of a thing, unlike her tall brother. At five feet three inches she still looked like she was barely sixteen. But, in fact, she’d just turned twenty-one.

She waved a notepad over her head.

“I did it, Nicky!” she smiled a big broad smile. His parents had decided at some point that Vivienne looked just like their grandmother on their father’s side. Irish to her core, Vivienne’s grandmother had the most beautiful head of red hair, fair skin that never seemed to blemish, and bright green eyes.

Nick smiled. “What did you do?” He set down his keys and smiled at her.

Vivienne bounced over to him, handing him the notepad. “I finished my book.”

“Reading?”

“No, silly. Writing.” She handed him the notepad. It was filled with her curly handwriting.

Nick frowned, “Writing what?”

Vivienne took a deep breath and stood up straight. “I want to be an author, just like Uncle Allan.”

“Viv, I...wait....what? When have you ever had any kind of inclination to write?”

“I’ve been writing forever; I just never show anyone.” She jutted out her chin. “And I’m good—maybe not as good as Uncle Allan—but still good. I think I have some of the Lavigne talent.”

Of course she would be a talented writer. His sister was full of secrets.

“Can I read it?” he asked, trying to bring back her exuberance.

Vivienne sat down on the arm rest, clutching her notepad.

“Only if you promise not to laugh.”

“Vivy,” Nick smiled, “I would never laugh at anything you write. Now show me.”

She nodded and got up, walking over to a stack of pages on the dining room table. She picked up a few of them, thumbing through them thoughtfully.

“Here, the first five chapters. I have to add to this what I wrote out this afternoon. See what you think.” As she handed him the pages, Nick noticed how nervous she looked. Clearly this was more important to her than he’d first thought.

Nick forced a smile. He was happy for his sister if this is what she wanted to do, but the morning encounter still tugged at him.

“I will give them my full attention and read them today. I promise. But right now I need to get ready for a meeting with the investor to update him on the store progress.”

Vivienne frowned, “Nick, are you okay? You seem sort of off.”

Nick could never keep anything from her. It was almost like she was psychic, which their grandmother was rumored to be.

“I’m fine.” Nick began to stand up, but a small, strong hand pulled him back.

“What’s wrong?” she asked softly.

“I ran into someone this morning.” He looked down at his sister, her sweet face looking at him intently.

“Kate?”

“Stop it.”

“I know these things. Besides, that look on your face is unmistakable.”

“What look is that?”

“The look of a train that’s derailed again.”

Nick shrugged, kissed her on the cheek, and pulled his arm out of her grip. “I’m fine.”  
“You’re not fine. Even after a year you’re still not fine.” Her voice was full of determination. “I hate her.”

“Viv, don’t say that. It wasn’t her fault.”

Her hands flew up. “Whoa, wait, not her fault? Was she kidnapped and forced to marry someone else?”

“She’s not married. Not yet anyway.”

His sister frowned. "Why? She left you for him; wouldn't you figure they'd make a beeline for the altar?"

Nick shrugged, "They're waiting." He couldn't help the sarcasm that tinged his voice.

Vivienne started laughing, "Waiting? You know what that's code for, right?"

Nick shook his head.

"That's code for, 'you're a jackass and until I'm certain you're not a jackass I'm going to keep the jewelry and keep you at arm's length.'"

Nick needed this conversation to end; he'd had enough of Kate for one day.

"I'm sure there are a million other reasons for waiting, Viv. Now I need to get ready."

She frowned, "That's another code. It's code for, 'I'm done talking about Kate.'"

"Well, I am. Besides, I've moved on."

"With Stephanie?" Vivienne threw her head back, shaking her curls in a mock-diva stance.

"Steph is a great gal, and she's been there for me."

"She's a sex toy, Nick. You should never marry a sex toy." Viv looked down at her chest, a little distracted and pushed out her A-cup breasts. "I need a boob job," she said, cupping her breasts.

"Stop that." Nick was getting impatient. Also, this was his sister, so, ew. "Steph is not a sex toy, and I'm not marrying her. We're dating."

"She's got her sights on you, Nicky."

Nick walked over to his sister and put his hands on her shoulders. "Viv, I adore you. I love you more than anything, but one thing a brother does not want to hear is his sister talking about the size of her boobs or that his girlfriend is a sex toy. Got it?"

Viv smiled and nodded, then she stood on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. "Read my book and let me know what you think," she said softly. "And I love you."

"I love you, too, Vivy. And I will."

After the signing, Kate headed back to the office. Despite the traumatic start to the event, the rest of the signing had gone off without a hitch. The authors had agreed to be at the same table and then, on Kate's orders, had done the appropriate amount of smiling and giggling. They'd even hugged a time or two. Truly there wasn't anything those girls wouldn't do for a book sale.

Kate left when the last of the crowds started to dwindle, leaving Annabelle to finish up the event now that Kate had cleaned up the author mess. Annabelle knew there was an unspoken rule that another barrage of texts like this morning would send her into the streets looking for another job.

Kate hadn't wanted to hire someone but Mac had insisted. So far the new hire seemed more trouble than she was worth.

Kate walked through the thick double glass doors of her office. Lavigne House was etched on the doors in big, bold script. She still felt a surge of pride and melancholy when she saw that name. She missed still Allan Lavigne and hoped that he was proud of what she'd done with his book.

There were five offices now, two of them occupied by herself and Mac. She'd offered one to her assistant, Lulu, but Lulu had refused. She said she liked being out on the center of

things. Kate had called an editor from her former company to join them recently: Rebecca Wright. She specialized in children's books, which was an area that Kate wanted to grow. Children; Young Adult; and a newly minted genre: New Adult, which included books between Adult and Young Adult. It was a hot new genre she wanted to capitalize on.

"Hey, Kate!" Lulu smiled at her, "How was the signing?"

Kate had sent her a text from the event, something about suffocating the divas in their own cookie batter.

Kate shook her head. "It ended up fine after I calmed them down."

"Kate, I'm sure Annabelle will do fine. Just give her a chance. Not everyone has your panache for, eh..."

"Talking authors off of a ledge?" Kate thought back to Haley, her author that nearly jumped off of a roof because her *Oprah* segment had gotten canceled.

Almost reading her mind, Lulu said, "I wonder how Haley is doing these days?"

"I hear she signed with Random House. Good for her, and good luck to them." Lulu snickered. "Do you ever miss the good old days at Morris and Dean?" she asked, referring to the publishing company where they both had gotten their start. It's also where she met Mac. Kate shrugged. "Sometimes, but not really. I mean I miss it because I wasn't in charge of everything there, just my small corner of the publicity world."

"Now it's all on you, Katie." MacDermott Ellis walked towards her. Her heart kicked in her chest; he still took her breath away. Tall, dark hair, and deep blue eyes. All predatory masculine grace. He walked with the certainty of a tiger—sleek, confident, and slightly dangerous. There was nothing insecure about Mac. He bent down and kissed her on the cheek. "Another fire averted, I hear?"

Kate nodded and smiled at Lulu, "Why don't you go home early? I know your kids are home from school."

Lulu beamed, "Really?"

"Do it." Mac smiled, "Get out of here. Kate and I will hold down the fort."

Lulu began shutting down her computer. "If you're sure. Kate, I left some stuff for you on your desk, and there are some emails about reviews that I forwarded to you. Oh, and some

new submissions, too. One of them seems promising, a Riley somebody. Women's fiction. It's amazing."

Mac wrapped an arm around Kate; his touch sent a tingle down her spine. "Sounds good, Lu. Now have a great weekend."

Kate turned to Mac and kissed him. "I'm meeting Grace for a drink later. Is that okay?"

"Of course. I had no plans for tonight. Go do girl stuff. Then when you get home, let's plan our wedding. I'm eager to make you official."

For the last two weeks Mac had really been pushing the wedding thing. Understandably. At first he'd been fine with their loose arrangement. However, since he and Kate attended his cousin's wedding a few weeks ago, Mac had become more urgent about making he and Kate official.

She'd kept putting it off. Too busy, whatever.

Kate blinked and somewhat unintentionally took a deep breath.

Mac pulled away slightly. "Katie, you still want to marry me, right?" he said tightly.

Kate swallowed, "Of course, of course I do. I just, it was a long morning."

"Got it," he smiled. Damn that was a good smile. "Go get caught up, then meet Gracie for drinks and come home so I can make passionate love to you."

Kate kissed him on the mouth. God she loved him. What the hell was she waiting for?