THE Kiss QUOTIENT

HELEN HOANG

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Dedicated to my family.

Thank you, Ngoại, Mẹ,
Chị 2, Chị 3, Chị 4, Anh 5, and 7,
for being my safe place.

Thank you, Honey,
for loving me, labels, quirks,
obsessions, and all.

Thank you, B-B and I-I,
for letting your mama write.
You are the best thing I have.

CHAPTER 1

"I know you hate surprises, Stella. In the interests of communicating our expectations and providing you a reasonable timeline, you should know we're ready for grandchildren."

Stella Lane's gaze jumped from her breakfast up to her mother's gracefully aging face. A subtle application of makeup drew attention to battle-ready, coffee-colored eyes. That boded ill for Stella. When her mother got something into her mind, she was like a honey badger with a vendetta—pugnacious and tenacious, but without the snarling and fur.

"I'll keep that in mind," Stella said.

Shock gave way to rapid-fire, panic-scrambled thoughts. Grandchildren meant babies. And diapers. Mountains of diapers. Exploding diapers. And babies cried, soul-grating banshee wails that even the best sound-canceling headphones couldn't buffer. How did they cry so long and hard when they were so little? Plus, babies meant husbands. Husbands meant boyfriends. Boyfriends meant dating. Dating meant *sex*. She shuddered.

"You're thirty, Stella dear. We're concerned that you're still single. Have you tried Tinder?"

She grabbed her water and gulped down a mouthful, accidentally swallowing an ice cube. After clearing her throat, she said, "No. I haven't tried it."

The very thought of Tinder—and the corresponding dating it aimed to deliver—caused her to break out in a sweat. She hated everything about dating: the departure from her comfortable routine, the conversation that was by turns inane and baffling, and again, the *sex* . . .

"I've been offered a promotion," she said, hoping it would distract her mother.

"Another one?" her father asked, lowering his copy of the *Wall Street Journal* so his wire-framed glasses were visible. "You were just promoted two quarters ago. That's phenomenal."

Stella perked up and scooted to the edge of her seat. "Our newest client—a large online vendor who shall remain nameless—provided the most amazing datasets, and I get to play with them all day. I designed an algorithm to help with some of their purchase suggestions. Apparently, it's working better than expected."

"When is the new promotion effective?" her father asked.

"Well . . ." The hollandaise and egg yolk from her crabcakes Benedict had run together, and she attempted to separate the yellow liquids with the tip of her fork. "I didn't accept the promotion. It was a principal econometrician position that would have had five direct reports beneath me and require much more client interaction. I just want to work on the data."

Her mother batted that statement away with a negligent wave of her hand. "You're getting complacent, Stella. If you stop challenging yourself, you're not going to make any more improvement with

your social skills. That reminds me, are there any coworkers at your company who you'd like to date?"

Her father set his newspaper down and folded his hands over his rounded belly. "Yes, what about that one fellow, Philip James? When we met him at your last company get-together, he seemed nice enough."

Her mother's hands fluttered to her mouth like pigeons homing in on bread crumbs. "Oh, why didn't I think of him? He was so polite. And easy on the eyes, too."

"He's okay, I guess." Stella ran her fingertips over the condensation on her water glass. To be honest, she'd considered Philip. He was conceited and abrasive, but he was a direct speaker. She really liked that in people. "I think he has several personality disorders."

Her mother patted Stella's hand. Instead of putting it back in her lap when she was done, she rested it over Stella's knuckles. "Maybe he'll be a good match for you, then, dear. With issues of his own to overcome, he might be more understanding of your Asperger's."

Though the words were spoken in a matter-of-fact tone, they sounded unnatural and loud to Stella's ears. A quick glance at the neighboring tables in the restaurant's canopied outdoor dining area reassured her that no one had heard, and she stared down at the hand on top of hers, consciously refraining from yanking it away. Uninvited touches irritated her, and her mother knew it. She did it to "acclimate" her. Mostly, it drove Stella crazy. Was it possible Philip could understand that?

"I'll think about him," Stella said, and meant it. She hated lying and prevaricating even more than she hated sex. And, at the end of the day, she wanted to make her mother proud and happy. No matter what Stella did, she was always a few steps short of being successful in her mother's eyes and therefore her own, too. A boyfriend

would do that, she knew. The problem was she couldn't keep a man for the life of her.

Her mother beamed. "Excellent. The next benefit dinner I'm arranging is in a couple months, and I want you to bring a date this time. I'd love to see Mr. James attending with you, but if that doesn't work out, I'll find someone."

Stella thinned her lips. Her latest sexual experience had been with one of her mother's blind dates. He'd been good-looking—she had to give him that—but his sense of humor had confused her. With him being a venture capitalist and her being an economist, they should have had a lot in common, but he hadn't wanted to talk about his actual work. Instead, he'd preferred to discuss office politics and manipulation tactics, leaving her so lost she'd been certain the date was a failure.

When he'd straight-out asked her if she wanted to have sex with him, she'd been caught completely off guard. Because she hated to say no, she'd said yes. There'd been kissing, which she didn't enjoy. He'd tasted like the lamb he'd had for dinner. She didn't like lamb. His cologne had nauseated her, and he'd touched her all over. As it always did in intimate situations, her body had locked down. Before she knew it, he'd finished. He'd discarded his used condom in the trash can next to the hotel room's desk—that had bothered her; surely he should know things like that went in the bathroom?—told her she needed to loosen up, and left. She could only imagine how disappointed her mother would be if she knew what a disaster her daughter was with men.

And now her mother wanted babies, too.

Stella got to her feet and gathered her purse. "I need to go to work now." While she was ahead on all her deadlines, *need* was still the right word for it. Work fascinated her, channeled the furious craving in her brain. It was also therapeutic.

"That's my girl," her father said, standing up and brushing off his silk Hawaiian shirt before hugging her. "You're going to own that place before long."

As she gave him a quick hug—she didn't mind touching when she initiated it or had time to mentally prepare for it—she breathed in the familiar scent of his aftershave. Why couldn't all men be just like her father? He thought she was beautiful and brilliant, and his smell didn't make her sick.

"You know her work is an unhealthy obsession, Edward. Don't encourage her," her mother said before she switched her attention to Stella and heaved a maternal sigh. "You should be out with people on the weekend. If you met more men, I know you'd find the right one."

Her father pressed a cool kiss to her temple and whispered, "I wish I were working, too."

Stella shook her head at him as her mother embraced her. The ropes of her mother's ever-present pearls pressed into Stella's sternum, and Chanel No. 5 swirled around her. She tolerated the cloying scent for three long seconds before stepping back.

"I'll see you both next weekend. I love you. Bye."

She waved at her parents before exiting the ritzy downtown Palo Alto restaurant and walked down sidewalks lined with trees and upscale shops. After three sunny blocks, she reached a low-rise office building that housed her favorite place in the world: her office. The left corner window on the third floor belonged to her.

The lock on the front door clicked open when she held her purse up to the sensor, and she strode into the empty building, enjoying the solitary echo of her high heels on the marble as she passed the vacant reception desk and stepped into the elevator.

Inside her office, she initiated her most beloved routine. First, she powered on her computer and entered her password into the

prompt screen. As all the software booted up, she plopped her purse in her desk drawer and went to fill her cup with water from the kitchen. Her shoes came off, and she placed them in their regular spot under her desk. She sat.

Power, password, purse, water, shoes, sit. Always this order.

Statistics Analysis System, otherwise known as SAS, automatically loaded, and the three monitors on her desk filled with streams of data. Purchases, clicks, log-in times, payment types—simple things, really. But they told her more about people than people themselves ever did. She stretched out her fingers and set them on the black ergonomic keyboard, eager to lose herself in her work.

"Oh hi, Stella, I thought it might be you."

She looked over her shoulder and was jarred by the unwelcome view of Philip James peering around the door frame. The severe cut of his tawny hair emphasized his square jaw, and his polo shirt was tight across his chest. He looked fresh, sophisticated, and smart—precisely the kind of man her parents wanted for her. And he'd caught her working for pleasure on the weekend.

Her face heated, and she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to pick up something that I forgot yesterday." He extracted a box from a shopping bag and waved it at her. Stella caught sight of the word *TROJAN* in giant capital letters. "Have a nice weekend. I know I will."

Breakfast with her parents raced through her mind. Grandchildren, Philip, the prospect of more blind dates, being successful. She licked her lips and hurried to say something, *anything*. "Did you really need an economy-sized box of those?"

As soon as the words left her mouth, she winced.

He smirked his assholest smirk, but its annoyingness was soft-

ened by a show of strong white teeth. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to need half of these tonight since the boss's new intern asked me out."

Stella was impressed despite herself. The new girl looked so shy. Who would have thought she was so gutsy? "For dinner?"

"And more, I think," he said with a twinkle in his hazel eyes.

"Why did you wait for her to ask you out? Why didn't you ask her first?" She'd gotten the impression men liked to be initiators in matters like these. Was she wrong?

With impatient motions, Philip stuffed an entire militia of Trojans back in his shopping bag. "She's fresh out of undergrad. I didn't want to get accused of cradle robbing. Besides, I like girls who know what they want and go for it . . . especially in bed." He swept an appraising gaze from her feet to her face, smiling like he could see through her clothes, and she stiffened with self-consciousness. "Tell me, are you still a virgin, Stella?"

She turned back to her computer screens, but the data refused to make sense. The cursor on the programming screen blinked. "It's none of your business, but no, I'm not a virgin."

He walked into her office, leaned a hip against her desk, and considered her in a skeptical manner. She adjusted her glasses even though they didn't need it. "So our star econometrician has 'done it' before. How many times? Three?"

No way was she going to tell him he'd guessed correctly. "None of your business, Philip."

"I bet you just lie there and run linear recursions in your head while a man does his business. Am I right, Ms. Lane?"

Stella would totally do that if she could figure out how to input gigabytes of data into her brain, but she'd rather die than admit it.

"A word of advice from a man who's been around the block a few times: Get some practice. When you're good at it, you like it better, and when you like it better, men like *you* better." He pushed

away from the desk and headed for the door, his bag of condoms swinging jauntily at his side. "Enjoy your endless week."

As soon as he left, Stella stood up and shoved her door shut, using more force than was necessary. The door slammed with a hard, vibrating bang, and her heart stuttered. She smoothed damp hands over her pencil skirt as she brought her breathing back under control. When she sat down at her desk, she was too jittery to do more than stare at the blinking cursor.

Was Philip right? Did she dislike sex because she was bad at it? Would practice really make perfect? What a beguiling concept. Maybe sex was just another interpersonal thing she needed to exert extra efforts on—like casual conversation, eye contact, and etiquette.

But how exactly did you practice sex? It wasn't like men were throwing themselves at her like women apparently did to Philip. When she did manage to sleep with a man, he was so put off by the lackluster experience that once was more than enough for both of them.

Also, this was Silicon Valley, the kingdom of tech geniuses and scientists. The single men available were probably as hopeless in bed as she was. With her luck, she'd sleep with a statistically significant population of them and have nothing to show for it but crotch burn and STDs.

No, what Stella needed was a professional.

Not only were they certified disease-free, but they had proven track records. At least, she assumed so. That was how she'd run things if she were in that business. Regular men were incentivized by things like personality, humor, and hot sex—things she didn't have. Professionals were incentivized by money. Stella happened to have a lot of money.

Instead of working on her shiny new dataset, Stella opened up her browser and Googled "California Bay Area male escort service."

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Which envelope should he open first? The lab results or the bill? Michael was paranoid about protection, so the lab results should be good. Should be. In his experience, shit didn't need a reason to happen. Bills, on the other hand, were a sure thing. They always sucked. The only question was how hard they'd punch him in the balls.

Tensing his muscles for impact, he tore open the bill. How much was it this month? He scanned to the bottom of the itemized invoice and located the final amount. The breath trickled from his lungs before it gusted out. Not horrible. On the scale of stinging to pulverizing, he'd put this one at merely bruising.

That probably meant he'd contracted chlamydia.

He set the bill down on top of the metal filing cabinet nestled behind his kitchen table and opened the lab results from his latest STD screening. All negative. Thank fuck. It was Friday evening again, which meant he needed to work tonight.

Time to get himself in the mind-set for fucking. Not an easy thing to do after thinking about STDs and plaguing bills. For an

instant, he let himself imagine what things would be like if the bills came to an end. He'd be free at last. He could return to his old life and—shame doused him. No, he didn't want the bills to end. He never wanted that to happen. Never.

As Michael padded through his cheap apartment toward the bathroom and shed his clothes, he tried to revive his old enthusiasm for this job. The taboo nature of it had been enough in the beginning, but after three years of escorting, that was pretty much old hat. The revenge aspect still satisfied him, though.

Look at your only son now, Dad.

It would torment his dad if he found out Michael was having sex for money. A thoroughly delightful thought. Not an arousing one, however. That was what fantasies were for. He mentally sifted through his favorites. What was he in the mood for tonight? *Hot for Teacher? Neglected Housewife? Secret Lover?*

He cranked the shower knob and waited for steam to cloud the air before climbing beneath the hot spray. A breath in, a breath out, and he readied his mind. What was the name of tonight's client again? Shanna? Estelle? No, Stella. He'd bet twenty dollars that wasn't her real name, but whatever. She'd chosen to pay up front. He'd try to do something extra nice for her. *Hot for Teacher*, then.

It was his freshman year of college. He skipped all of his lectures but this one because Ms. Stella liked to drop the chalkboard eraser right by his chair. Picturing her skirt riding up as she bent down to retrieve the eraser, he gripped his cock and stroked with firm motions. When class ended, he draped her facedown over her desk and bunched her skirt up to her waist to reveal that she wasn't wearing panties. He plunged into her hard and fast. If someone walked in on them . . .

With a groan, he yanked his hand away before he could fly over the edge. He was primed and ready to see Ms. Stella outside of class.

He kept his mind locked in the fantasy as he finished with his shower, dried off, and left the bathroom to pull on jeans, a T-shirt, and a black sports coat. A quick look in the half-fogged mirror and two swipes of his fingers through his damp hair confirmed he was presentable.

Condoms, keys, wallet. Out of habit, he reread the special comments section of tonight's assignment on his phone.

Please don't wear cologne.

That was easy. He didn't like the stuff in the first place. He slipped his phone into his pocket along with everything else and left his apartment.

It wasn't long before he parked in the underground lot of the Clement Hotel. As he strolled into the sleek, ultramodern lobby, he made sure the lapels of his coat were down and played his usual pre-meet-and-greet game where he imagined what his new client was like.

Under Client Age for tonight, it had said thirty. He sighed and corrected the age to fifty. Anything younger than forty was always a lie—unless it was a group thing, which he didn't do. Bachelorette parties paid well, but the idea of destroying young love depressed the hell out of him. Maybe it was pathetic, but he wanted to live in a world where brides-to-be only had sex with their grooms-to-be and vice versa. Besides, large groups of horny women were terrifying. You couldn't defend yourself against them, and their nails were sharp.

"Stella" could be a pampered fifty who indulged in sweets, spas, and froufrou canines, was therefore decadently rounded, and preferred to be worshipped in bed—something Michael had no problem with. She could also be a fit fifty who liked yoga, green juice, and marathon sex sessions that worked his abs better than weighted incline crunches. Or, his least favorite, she could be a hard-ass Asian go-getter who chose him because, with his mixed Vietnamese and Swedish heritage, he looked a lot like the K-drama star Daniel Henney.

This last kind of woman inevitably reminded him of his mom, and after sleeping with them, he needed therapy with a punching bag.

Entering the hotel restaurant, he searched the dimly lit tables for a brown-haired, brown-eyed woman wearing glasses. Because he'd gotten through his mail without major incident earlier, he braced himself for the worst now. His gaze skipped over tables occupied by businessmen until he saw a solitary, middle-aged Asian woman micromanaging the waitress on how to make her salad. When she brushed manicured nails through her lightened brown hair, his stomach sank and he began walking toward her. It was going to be a long night.

No, this was the culmination of a semester's worth of sexual tension. They both wanted this. He wanted this.

Before he could reach her, a reed-thin older man took the seat opposite her and covered her hand with his. Confused but relieved, Michael stepped back and surveyed the restaurant again. No one was sitting alone . . . but for a girl in the far corner.

Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and sexy librarian-type glasses were balanced on a cute little nose. In fact, from what he could see of her, everything looked like it had been chosen from a sexy librarian cosplay. She wore neat pointed pumps, a gray pencil skirt, and a fitted white oxford shirt buttoned clear up to her throat. It was possible she was thirty, but Michael put her at twenty-five. There was something young and wholesome about her, though her frown was rather fierce as she scrutinized the menu.

Michael glanced about the room, searching for a hidden camera team or his friends cracking up behind the potted plants. He found neither of those things.

He closed his hands around the back of the chair across from her. "Excuse me, are you Stella?"

Her eyes shot to his face, and Michael lost his train of thought.

Those sexy librarian glasses showcased the most stunning pair of soft brown eyes. And her lips—they were just full enough to be tempting without detracting from her overall air of sweetness.

"I'm sorry. I must have the wrong person," he said with a smile he hoped was more apologetic and less embarrassed. There was no way a girl like this had hired an escort.

She blinked and jostled the table as she flew to her feet. "No, that's me. You're Michael. I recognize you from your picture." She stuck her hand out. "I'm Stella Lane. Nice to meet you."

He stared at her open expression and proffered hand for a stunned fraction of a second. This wasn't how clients greeted him. They usually waved him into a seat with a sly curl of their lips and a sparkle in their eyes—that sparkle that said they thought they were better than him but were looking forward to what he could offer anyway. She greeted him like he was . . . an equal.

Quickly recovering from his surprise, he wrapped her slender hand in his and shook it. "Michael Phan. Nice to meet you, too."

When he released her, she motioned toward his chair awkwardly. "Please, have a seat."

He sat and watched as she perched herself on the precarious edge of her seat, her back straight as a board. She searched his face, but when he arched an eyebrow at her, she switched her focus to the menu. She adjusted the position of her glasses with a wrinkle of her nose.

"Are you hungry? I am." Her knuckles went white as she clung to the menu. "The salmon is good here, and the steak. My dad likes the lamb—" Her gaze jumped to his face, and, even in the dim light, he could see her cheeks go crimson. She cleared her throat. "Maybe not the lamb."

Because he couldn't resist, he asked, "Why not the lamb?"

"I think it tastes woolly, and if you . . . when we . . ." She stared

up at the ceiling and took a deep breath. "All I'd be thinking about would be sheep and lambs and wool."

"Understood," he said with a grin.

When she stared at his mouth like she couldn't remember what she was going to say, his grin widened. Women chose him because they liked the way he looked. Few of them responded to him like this, however. It was flattering even as it was funny.

"Are there any things you would prefer *I* not eat or drink?" she asked.

"No, I'm pretty easy." He kept his voice light and tried to ignore the tightness in his chest. It had to be heartburn. Simple thoughtfulness wasn't doing this to him.

After the waitress took their order and left, Stella sipped from her water glass and drew geometrical shapes in the condensation with delicate fingertips. When she noticed him watching her, she drew her hand back and sat on it, flushing like she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't.

Something about that was kind of endearing. If she hadn't already paid, he wouldn't believe she actually wanted this. Why did she want this? She should have a boyfriend . . . or a husband. Against his better judgment—it was best when he didn't know—he looked at her left hand resting on the table. No ring. No white line.

"I have a proposition for you," she said suddenly, pinning him with a gaze that was surprisingly direct. "It would require a commitment of sorts—for the next couple months, I imagine. I would . . . prefer . . . to have sole access to you during that time. If you're available."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Please tell me if you're available first."

"I only do Friday nights." That was non-negotiable. Escorting once a week was bad enough. If he had to do it more than that, he'd

lose his fucking mind, and he couldn't afford for that to happen. Too many people depended on him.

He never scheduled repeat appointments with the same client, either. They tended to get attached, and he couldn't stand that. But he wanted to hear what she was proposing before he declined.

"You have the next few months open, then?" she asked.

"It depends on what you're proposing."

She pushed her glasses up her nose and drew her shoulders back. "I'm awful at . . . what you do. But I want to get better. I think I can get better if someone would teach me. I'd like that person to be you."

Understanding splashed over Michael in surreal waves. She thought she was bad. At sex. And wanted lessons to improve. She wanted him to tutor her.

How the hell did you teach sex?

"I think we should do a trial run before we set anything up," Michael hedged. She couldn't actually be bad at sex, and she'd already paid. At the very least, he had to give her tonight.

Frowning, she nodded. "You're absolutely right. We should establish a baseline."

A grin tugged at his lips again. "Are you a scientist, Stella?"

"Oh, no. I'm an economist. More precisely, I'm an econometrician."

In Michael's book, that put her solidly in the brainiac category, and an odd feeling ghosted up the back of his neck. Damned if he didn't have a thing for smart girls. There was a reason why his favorite fantasy was *Hot for Teacher*. "I don't know what that is."

"I use statistics and calculus to model economic systems. Do you know how when you buy something online they usually email you with future recommendations? I help them formulate those recommendations. It's a very fluid and fascinating field right now." As she

spoke, she leaned toward him, and her eyes lit with excitement. Her lips curved like she was telling him a secret. About math things. "Today's material is completely different from what I used to teach when I was in graduate school."

That odd feeling simmering up Michael's spine increased in intensity. She'd somehow gotten prettier during the course of their discussion. Brown eyes and thick lashes, pouty lips, delicate jaw, vulnerable neck. Vivid images of him unfastening the buttons of her shirt flashed in his mind.

But unlike the usual, he didn't want to do it quickly. He didn't want to skip straight to the fucking, get out, and go home. This girl was different. It was that spark in her eyes. He wanted to take his time and see if he could make her shine with a different kind of excitement. His cock dug at the fly of his jeans, dragging Michael back to the here and now.

His skin had gone hot and sensitive, and his pulse thrummed with eagerness. He hadn't been this turned on in forever. And he hadn't been fantasizing she was someone else. He reminded himself this was business. His personal wants and needs didn't play into this at all. This assignment was just like any other, and when it was done, he'd move on to the next.

He took a deep breath and said the first thing he could think of. "Were you on the math team in high school?"

She laughed down at her water. "No."

"Science club? Maybe it was chess club."

"No, and no." Her smile was a sad, barely there thing that made him wonder what high school had been like for her. Looking back up at him, she said, "Let me guess, football quarterback."

"Nope. My dad was a firm believer that sports are stupid."

Her brow wrinkled with a little frown. "I find that difficult to believe. You're very . . . athletic-looking."

"He only encouraged practical things. Like self-defense." He hated to agree with his dad on anything, but with the family business being what it was, and his helping out with it, the techniques had come in handy when shit kids teased him.

A discovering kind of smile lit her face. "What do you do? MMA? Kung fu? Jeet Kune Do?"

"I've done a little of everything. Why do you sound like you actually know what you're talking about?"

Her gaze dropped back down to her water. "I like martial arts movies and things like that."

He groaned as suspicion dawned. "Don't tell me . . . you're a Korean drama fan?"

She tilted her head as a smile peeked over her lips. "Yes."

"I do *not* look like Daniel Henney."

"No, you look better."

He settled his hands on the edge of the table as his face heated. Fuck, he was blushing. What the hell kind of escort blushed? His sisters had posters of Henney plastered all over their bedroom walls, had even established a man-beauty scale of one to Henney. They'd agreed among themselves that Michael was a solid eight. He didn't give a damn where he ranked, but it meant something that this genius girl gave him an eleven.

Their dinner arrived, saving him from having to respond to her compliment. She'd ordered the salmon, so he'd done the same. No way was he going to eat lamb. He snorted to himself. *Woolly.*

His fish was good, so he ate all of it. He suspected everything was good here. The Clement was one of Palo Alto's most exclusive hotels with rooms going for more than a thousand dollars a night. Apparently, econometricians made shitloads of money.

As he watched Stella pick at her dinner, however, he noticed that everything about her was understated. Her face was devoid of

makeup, her nails were short and unpainted, and her clothes were simple—though they fit her perfectly. They had to be custom made.

When she set her fork down and wiped her mouth, her salmon was only half finished. If they'd known each other better, he would have eaten it for her. His grandma always made him finish his dinner down to the last grain of rice.

"Is that all you're going to eat?"

"I'm nervous," she admitted.

"You don't need to be." He was a damned good escort, and he'd take care of her. Unlike most of his assignments, he even looked forward to it.

"I know. I can't help it. Could we just get this over with?"

His eyebrows twitched. He'd never heard someone say something like that in reference to a night with him. Changing her mind-set was going to be fun.

"All right." He draped his napkin over his empty dinner plate and got to his feet. "Let's go to your room."

CHAPTER 3

After Stella unlocked the door, she stepped into her intimately lit suite, set her purse on the chair by the door, and arranged her high heels against the wall, almost sighing as her bare feet flattened on the carpet.

Michael sent her an amused look, and she stared down at her toes. She'd taken her shoes off on autopilot. It was one of her routines. Was it rude to do that when you had company? Maybe she should put them back on. Her stomach knotted, and her heart raced at rabbit speed.

He took the decision out of her hands by kicking off his own black leather shoes and positioning them next to hers. When he finished, he shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it on the chair next to her purse, revealing the simple white T-shirt underneath. It stretched over his chest and upper arms, and his jeans rode low on narrow hips. Stella couldn't help but stare.

His body was raw sculpted muscle and loose-limbed coordination. He was by far the finest male specimen she'd ever laid eyes on.

And they were going to have sex tonight.

She took a desperate breath and marched into the bathroom, where she braced her hands on the cool granite and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were open a fraction too wide, and her face was paper pale, her lips dry. She didn't think she could go through with this. She shouldn't have picked such a good-looking escort. What had she been thinking?

Her lips twisted with a grimace. She hadn't *been* thinking. After perusing the escort files for hours, sifting through countless faces and descriptions that had blurred together, she'd taken one look at Michael and known he was the one. It'd been his eyes. Dark brown with slashing eyebrows above, they looked intense . . . but kind. All of his five-star reviews had only cemented her decision. Looking like the hottest K-drama star ever didn't hurt, either. Well, except for now, that was. There was a good chance she might throw up her dinner into the sink.

Through the mirror, she saw him step into the doorway and lean against the jamb. That motion alone was so sexy, she felt her heart trip, stumble, and scramble to continue beating. He walked into the bathroom and stopped behind her, his eyes locked on hers in the mirror. When she wasn't wearing her heels, he was more than half a foot taller than her. She wasn't sure if she liked feeling this small.

"Can I take your hair down?" he asked.

She nodded once. Within seconds, the tension on her scalp released, and her hair tumbled free. Her black hairband landed on the countertop before he eased his fingers into her hair, separating the tendrils so they fell to her shoulders and down her back. She vibrated with tension as she waited for him to initiate intimacy and send her body into nervous lockdown. It was going to happen, and then he'd see what he was working with.

A black imperfection on his bicep caught her eye, and she turned around to inspect it closer. She lifted a hand to touch it but stopped

before making contact. She never touched people without permission. "What is this?"

His lips curved with a slow, crooked grin, showing off perfect white teeth. "My tattoo."

Her throat worked on an involuntary swallow, and a wave of heat swept over her. She'd never seen the point of tattoos. Until now. Michael with a tattoo was just about the hottest thing she could imagine.

Her fingers itched to pull his sleeve up farther, and she wavered over his arm until he caught her hand in his and pressed it to his skin. An electric jolt shot from her fingertips straight to her heart. He looked so perfect, like carved stone, but his skin was smooth and hot, firm but giving, *alive*.

"You can touch me," he said. "Anywhere."

Even as the invitation thrilled her, it gave her pause. Touching was such a private thing. She didn't understand how he was able to do it so well with people he didn't know.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" she asked.

That crooked grin returned in full force. "I like being touched."

When she continued to hesitate, he drew his sleeve up himself, exposing black ink marks that swept across his upper arm, over his shoulder, and disappeared beneath his T-shirt. The tattoo had to be quite large because the shape hadn't even begun to materialize. Just how much of him did it cover?

The swell of his muscles distracted her from further investigating. She'd never touched hard rounded flesh like this before. She wanted to touch him all over. And his scent. How was it she was just noticing it now?

"Are you wearing cologne?" she asked as she filled her lungs.

He stiffened. "No, why?"

She leaned as close as she could without burying her face against

his neck, seeking out more of that intoxicating scent. "You smell really, really good. What is it?"

Where was that scent coming from? It seemed to be everywhere on him, but too light. She craved a more concentrated dose.

"Michael?"

A funny look crossed his face. "It's just me, Stella."

"*You* smell this good?"

"Apparently. You're the first to comment on it."

"I want this smell all over me." As the words left her mouth, she worried she'd said the wrong thing. That statement had sounded a little too personal, a little strange. Would he notice how strange she really was?

He bent down so his lips hovered a hairsbreadth away from her ear and whispered, "Are you sure you're bad at sex?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"It means so far you're very good at it."

Her fingers flexed on his arm, and she battled the urge to press herself against him like a stripper on a pole. It bewildered her. She was not at all stripperish, and unlike him, she actively disliked touching. But she craved connection so much she hurt with it. "So far we haven't done anything yet."

"You're very good at the talking part."

"I've had sex. There isn't a talking part."

A spark danced in his eyes. "There's *definitely* a talking part."

Please, don't let there be a talking part. There was no hope for her if it involved talking. "So far—"

He gathered her hair to one side and brushed a fleeting kiss behind her ear. It happened so quickly that by the time her body tensed up he'd already pulled away. When he didn't move to repeat the caress, her muscles relaxed once again. The place where he'd kissed her burned with awareness.

Without touching her skin, he stroked his fingers over her hair. Slow, measured movements that swept from her crown, past her neck, and down her back. The motions calmed her even as they put her on edge.

"I think you should kiss me," he said in a husky voice.

Her heart squeezed tight, and her skin pricked with panic. She was a horrible kisser. Her awkward attempts were sure to embarrass them both. "On the mouth?"

The corner of said mouth kicked up. "Wherever you want to. The mouth is usually a good place to start."

"Maybe I should brush my teeth. I can do that right—"

He pressed a thumb to her lips, silencing her, but his eyes were gentle. That touch, too, was gone before it fully registered in her brain. "Let's try this another way. Do you want to see my tattoo?"

Her mind eagerly switched gears, jumping from fear straight to excitement. "Yes."

With a small smile that was half amusement and half self-deprecating, he pulled his white T-shirt over his head and tossed it on the counter.

Stella's mouth went lax as she filled her eyes with him. A dragon's head, its mouth open in midroar, covered the entire left half of his wide, sculpted chest. The ink on his shoulder and arm formed one of the creature's claws. The intricate scales of its body worked diagonally across his abs and disappeared inside his jeans.

"It's all over you," she commented.

"It is. Here . . ." He captured her right hand and pressed it to the ink over his heart. "Feel it."

"You don't mind?" When he shook his head, she bit her lip and tentatively settled her left hand on his chest as well.

Her touch was timid at first, but when he didn't object, she grew bolder. She pushed her hands across his firm chest, enjoying the

ridges of defined muscle and the smoothness of his hairless skin. Tactilely, she couldn't discern a difference between his inked skin and his unmarked skin. *Fascinating.*

Her fingertips bumped down his abdomen, and she counted under her breath, "—Five. Six. Seven. Eight." Her fingers met the waistband of his jeans, and his stomach muscles flexed and rippled as he took a breath.

"You couldn't have a regular six-pack? You had to make it eight?"

He rolled his eyes as his lips curved. "Are you complaining, Stella?"

"Nothing to complain about. I had no idea I liked tattoos until now."

"So you like it?"

She thought that should be obvious, so she didn't answer. Besides, it was getting difficult to concentrate. The sight of his perfect athlete's body and his excessive tattoo, the feel of his hot skin, and his delicious scent overwhelmed her senses.

"Can I take your glasses off? Will you still be able to see without them?"

She swallowed and nodded. "I'm nearsighted, so I won't be able to see things far away, but that's all right because—"

He slipped her glasses off. A soft clinking sounded as he set them on the counter behind her. The hotel suite and everything around her became a soft blur. Only he stood out in sharp focus. The solid feel of him against her palms grounded her.

"It might be easier to kiss me if you wrap your arms around my neck," he suggested.

Her fingers twitched as she dragged them across the decadent expanse of his stomach and over his hard chest. After looping her arms stiffly around his neck, she said, "Done."

"Closer."

She inched forward.

"More."

She inched forward again, stopping before their bodies could come flush together.

"Stella, *closer*."

Understanding broke over her, and she settled herself against him. They were touching almost everywhere. Only the thin layers of her clothes separated them. Her nerves jangled, and panic threatened, but he didn't rush her. He stood still, watching her with his patient, *kind* eyes. Against all odds, she relaxed.

"Are you still with me?" he asked.

Coming up onto her tiptoes, she aligned their bodies until they fit . . . just right. Her heart crashed in a crazy rhythm against her sternum, but she was still in control of herself—because, clever person that he was, he'd given her that control. "I'm okay."

When he closed his arms carefully around her, his heat sank through her shirt and warmed her skin. The pressure of his undemanding embrace reached deep inside her, calming her and loosening knots she hadn't known were there. Maybe she was better than okay.

She would gladly pay his escorting fee again just for him to hold her like this. This was heavenly. She burrowed her face into his neck and breathed him in. She skated her hands over his bare skin as she tried to nestle closer to him. If he could hold her a little tighter . . .

Something hard prodded her belly, and she drew her head back.

"You can ignore that," he said.

"We haven't kissed or anything. How can you . . . ?"

Hooded eyes searched hers as he lowered a hand from between her shoulder blades to the small of her back. The heat of his palm penetrated her clothes, and all the fine hairs on her body stood up. "This goes two ways, Stella. You like the feel of me. I like the feel of you."

That was a novel concept to her. Intimacy almost always was a one-way thing with her. The men enjoyed it—sort of. She did not.

She was enjoying this, however. It made her feel brave and reckless.

Her gaze locked on his lips again, and her blood raced with something new: anticipation. "Will you show me how to be a good kisser?"

"I'm not certain you aren't one already."

"I'm really not."

His mouth was inches away, but she couldn't quite push herself to kiss it—even though she wanted to. She'd never initiated a kiss before. In the past, the men had just kind of . . . fallen on her.

"Can I tell you where to kiss me?" she whispered.

A smile slowly stretched his lips. "Yes."

"M-my temple."

His breath fanned over her ear, sending goose bumps down her neck, before he pressed a kiss to her left temple. "Now where?" The words were spoken softly against her skin, each one a caress.

"My cheek."

The tip of his nose grazed her skin as he moved lower. He kissed the hollow beneath her cheekbone. "Now?" he asked without lifting his lips.

So close. She could hardly breathe. "The corner of my m-mouth."

"Are you sure? That's very close to being a real kiss."

Impulsive impatience seared through her, and she sank her fingers into his hair, held him in place, and pressed a closed-mouth kiss to his lips. Bolts of sensation zigzagged straight to her chest. After a surprised hesitation, she did it again, and he took the lead, showing her how it was done, drawing the kisses out.

This was kissing. Kissing was glorious.

When his tongue slipped between her lips, she went stock-still.

Not glorious anymore. His tongue. Was in. Her *mouth*. She couldn't stop herself from pulling away. "Is that absolutely necessary?"

He exhaled sharply, and his brow creased in puzzlement. "You don't like French kissing?"

"It makes me feel like a shark getting its teeth cleaned by pilot fish." It was weird and far too personal.

His eyes danced, and though he bit his lip, she could see a grin peeking around the edges of his mouth.

"Are you laughing at me?" Hot shame burned her face. She ducked her head and tried to back up, but the bathroom counter dug into her spine.

The pressure of his fingertips on her chin made her face him again, leading her to believe he wanted eye contact. There were rules for that which she'd had to learn. Three seconds counted slowly in your head. Less and people thought you were hiding something. Longer and you made them uncomfortable. She'd gotten passably good at it. Now, however, she couldn't bring herself to do it. She didn't want to see what he thought of her. She shut her eyes.

"I was laughing at your analogy. You're very funny."

"Oh." She hazarded a glance at his face and found sincerity there. People said that to her sometimes, and she never understood it. She didn't know how to be funny. It only ever happened by accident.

"Instead of thinking of sharks at the dentist, think of me caressing your mouth. Concentrate on how it *feels*. Will you let me show you?"

She nodded once. That was why they were here, after all.

He bent toward her mouth once again, and she fisted her hands against his chest and braced herself. Instead of pushing his tongue between her lips, he kissed her like he had before, more drugging closed-mouth kisses. *These* she could do. *These* she liked. They rained

upon her mouth in an unhurried procession. Some of her stress drained away, and her fingers uncurled.

Wet heat stroked over her bottom lip. His tongue. She knew it was his tongue, but closed-mouth kisses made her forget. Another stroke, and shivery sensations cascaded outward. More kisses. In between aching presses of his lips, his tongue caressed her, making her skin tingle.

Soon he was seducing her mouth, stroking her bottom lip, the top lip, teasing the crease. Maybe she parted her lips. Maybe she *wanted* him to go further. But he didn't. The closed-mouth kisses she'd liked so much in the beginning were no longer enough. She tried to capture his tongue, to take it into herself, but he evaded her. He brushed at her lips with maddening strokes, dipped inside for the merest second, withdrew, and she kneaded his shoulders in frustration.

Over and over again, he gave her a brief taste of salt and heat, and then retreated. Without consciously deciding to do it, she sealed her mouth with his and touched her tongue to his. His taste flooded her senses. Butterflies exploded in her stomach and sped through her veins. Her legs went weak, but his arms tightened around her, keeping her from falling.

He sucked on her bottom lip and laved the sensitized skin before taking her mouth again. The room began spinning, and she realized she'd forgotten to breathe.

Coming up for air, she said, "Oh my God, you taste good."

For a moment, he stared at her mouth like she'd taken something that he wanted back. He blinked the expression away, and a gravelly chuckle escaped kiss-reddened lips she wanted to touch with her fingertips. "Do you always say exactly what you're thinking?"

"Either that or I don't talk." No matter how she tried, she couldn't overcome it. Her brain simply wasn't wired for social sophistication.

"I like hearing what you're thinking. Especially when I'm kissing you." But instead of kissing her again, he stepped away and tugged on her hand. "Come on. I don't want to bruise you on this counter."

That was when she noticed the hard granite pressing into her back. As she let him lead her from the bathroom, she glanced at her hazy reflection in the mirror. She didn't recognize that girl with the flushed cheeks and wild hair, could hardly believe she'd kissed a man and enjoyed it. Was it possible she'd be able to conquer what came next, as well?