



EM LYNLEY

Sex, Lies, & Wedding Bells

ra^venous
romance

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

Ravenous Romance

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CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

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A Ravenous Romance™ Panamour™ Original Publication

E.M. Lynley

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Dedication

For Engel: It's not possible to thank you enough. Because of you, I started writing again, so I lay the blame fully at your feet. Your constant level of enthusiasm and excitement kept me writing when I had doubts and without your support, comments, and encouragement I wouldn't have had the confidence to share my work with a wider audience. Now look what you've done!

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter One

Thursday

New York City

The first thing Kieran noticed when he woke up was something warm and wet on his cock. He let out a small moan, enjoying the sensations. He remembered leaving Brut—his favorite club, just a few blocks from his place—with a model. He couldn't quite remember which one, not that it mattered: Based on what the guy was doing to his cock, Kieran had made a good choice. He slowly opened his eyes and saw a pair of big blue eyes staring right back at him with a mischievous glint. *Ah*, yes. Now he remembered.

Kieran had no idea what the guy's name was, but his face was more than familiar. Just about everyone in the city had seen it, 10 times larger than life, looking down from a Times Square billboard and the sides of countless city buses. Now that same mouth with its full pink lips was wrapped around Kieran's cock. He couldn't think of anywhere he'd rather be at the moment. The guy—*Rod*?—swirled his tongue around the head of Kieran's cock and flicked across the sensitive bundle of nerves on the underside. He took most of Kieran into his mouth, the tip of his cock just brushing against the back of Rod's throat. He let out a groan that vibrated all the way down Kieran's cock. Warmth flooded across Kieran's belly, gradually becoming an ache in his balls. He sat up and tugged at Rod's shoulder-length blonde hair. Rod looked up at him with his cornflower blue eyes again and Kieran pulled Rod

onto his lap and kissed him deeply, his cock sliding along the cleft of Rod's ass. Rod moaned into the kiss and let himself melt against Kieran's chest.

"No biting," Rod said, as Kieran scraped his teeth along one shoulder.

Damn underwear models and their rules, Kieran thought, and pulled his lips over his teeth. He knew Rod couldn't show up for a photo shoot with teeth marks on his perfect body. Memories flooded back to Kieran: Rod mentioned he was doing a new shoot in which he'd be completely nude, with just someone's leg thrown across his crotch area. A men's fragrance ad with the tagline "It's all I wear to bed," or something along those lines. *Can't wait to see the billboard for that one*, Kieran thought, looking at the real thing in his lap.

Kieran put his hands on Rod's hips and lifted him slightly, settling him onto his back, legs still wrapped around his waist, heels pressing into the small of his back. Rod let out a throaty sigh and relaxed back onto the lapis-colored, 800-threadcount sheets and spread his legs wide. Kieran admired the view of Rod's even tan on smooth, firm flesh and reached over to the bedside table to grab a condom. Rod pulled the packet slowly from Kieran's fingers and ripped it open using his teeth, never letting his eyes off Kieran's, conveying his own need and arousal as effectively as his erection did. He rolled the condom onto Kieran's hardness and gracefully hooked one knee over Kieran's shoulder while he waited for Kieran to apply extra lube to his cock.

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

Kieran tentatively pushed one slick finger into Rod and met no resistance. He added another. Rod was more than ready and Kieran wasted no time pressing the tip of his cock against Rod's slippery hole and plunging inside with one smooth move that overwhelmed his senses. Rod moaned as he took Kieran in, encouraging and increasing Kieran's own pleasure at the tight, hot grip of Rod's ass around his cock. It felt just as good as it had the two previous times he'd fucked Rod, before they'd both fallen into a deep, sated sleep in the early hours of the morning.

On top of Rod like this, Kieran couldn't really see as much of the man's gorgeous body as he would like; so he slowed his thrusts before either of them got too close to orgasm, wanting a better view. Kieran sat at the edge of the bed, facing the large mirror door of his closet and pulled Rod back into his lap, back-to-front, Rod's legs straddling Kieran's.

"I want to see how beautiful you are," Kieran mumbled huskily, "and watch you lose control." He helped Rod ease himself down onto Kieran's cock. With his hands on Rod's hips, Kieran easily moved him up and down as he watched in the mirror.

"God," Rod moaned, "yeah, just keep ... fucking me ... like ... *that*."

Rod's head was thrown back against Kieran's shoulder, legs splayed wide so Kieran could stroke and play with his cock and fondle his balls as Rod fucked himself down on Kieran with an uneven rhythm. It didn't take long before Rod was so fucked out he could barely move on his own and

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

Kieran had to do most of the work. That was fine with Kieran; he loved seeing a guy this far gone

Kieran had Rod coming with a few skillful strokes, shooting thick creamy jets up across his chest and shuddering around Kieran's cock as he grunted and sighed with his orgasm, whispering a few mouthfuls of delightfully filthy comments. Kieran came a moment later, still feeling Rod's aftershocks squeezing his cock, trying to keep his own eyes open so he could enjoy watching Rod as he pumped his own release inside him. The nearly dead weight of Rod's body in his lap intensified Kieran's own pleasure, as his orgasm ripped through his body, pleasurable sensations ricocheting and reverberating along every inch of his skin and leaving him spent and exhausted and perfectly satisfied.

Kieran lay back, pulling Rod along with him. They lay quietly while their breathing returned to normal. Then Rod slipped out of bed and into the bathroom, and Kieran was surprised to hear the shower start. He disposed of the condom in a trash can next to the bed and waited, reliving the activities and enjoying his own afterglow. Rod took a surprisingly short shower and came back into the bedroom with just a few droplets of water on his beautiful nude body as he toweled his long, damp hair.

"Got any coffee?" he asked, bending bent down to collect his scattered clothes from the floor.

"Sorry, no. I usually go out for breakfast." Kieran sat up in bed and watched Rod dress himself. "Want to come along?"

"I'm late as it is," Rod said, not bothering to button his shirt. He slipped on his jeans, socks and shoes hurriedly

before leaning down and brushing his lips against Kieran's. Rod's hand slid down Kieran's chest gently stroked his cock one last time before Rod straightened up and left, waving a farewell.

"Bye, Rod," Kieran said.

"*Todd*," Todd-not-Rod corrected with an annoyed look, then turned on his heel and left. Only slightly embarrassed, Kieran listened as Todd let himself out the front door; and then with a heavy sigh padded into the bathroom to shower and get his own day started. He had to go into the magazine's office, and by the time he had breakfast it would be close to noon. *No matter*, he decided as he shampooed his hair. He'd already turned in his column the evening before by e-mail. All he needed was to get final approval from his editor.

Once Kieran washed and dressed, the only clue to his late-night and morning activities was the broad smile on his face as he walked out the front door of his building's lobby. He rounded the corner of his street and walked half a block to the tiny diner where he had most of his breakfasts. Inside he was greeted with warm smiles and cheerful waves by the two waitresses on duty, and seated himself in a booth near the window. Kieran liked watching people pass by on the street while he ate. He ordered a vegetable and cheese omelet, hash browns, and a fruit salad. His food arrived quickly and while he ate, his mind went over the night and morning he'd spent with Todd.

Physically, there was nothing to complain about. He'd been more than satisfied in that regard. But Kieran still felt that there had to be something more than what he and Todd had

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

shared. Once again, here he was having breakfast—more like brunch, considering the hour—on his own, the way he did nearly every day. It was a seemingly endless parade of hot guys who had been to his place or with whom he'd gone home. Last night's guest was one of the few who spent the whole night; but Kieran would much rather have woken up in someone's arms than someone's mouth. He'd even asked Rod—*Todd*, he reminded himself—to have breakfast, and that was certainly a break from the usual routine.

It wasn't as if they'd had anything to talk about; but Kieran had at least tried for more than a few pleasant hours in bed with the guy. *It might have gone better if I remembered his correct name*, Kieran thought, but reminded himself Todd had already turned down the breakfast invitation before Kieran's faux pas.

* * * *

Kieran finally rolled into the office of *Gloss* magazine—a *New Yorker*-style literary weekly aimed at a younger audience—well past noon, and got a mixed response of smiles and murderous glares from his coworkers. One person went so far as to mutter "*Prima fucking donna*" under her breath. Kieran was unfazed. He smiled his usual million-watt smile and greeted everyone cheerfully as he set his six-foot, four-inch frame at his desk in the center of an old-fashioned bullpen writers' room. He was still in a fantastic mood after the night—and morning—he'd spent with Todd, a guy who undoubtedly everyone in this room would recognize.

He was quietly humming as he tugged at his half-tucked shirttail, fanning himself to help the cool air-conditioned breeze counteract Manhattan's muggy, mid-May heat. *Might as well give them a show if they're still staring*, Kieran thought as he treated half the room to a nice view of his chiseled abs. *Makes all those hours in the gym worth it*, he thought as he heard several people sigh. Smiling, Kieran settled into his chair and brushed damp strands of dark brown hair behind his ears.

"Kieran, nice to see you!" boomed a loud voice behind him, oozing sarcasm and irony.

"Jeff, hey!" Kieran replied cheerfully.

"Kieran, what does the sign on my door say?" Jeff asked, walking around to the back of Kieran's desk and perching himself on its edge. In one hand he had a rolled-up sheaf of papers which he thwacked against the palm of his other hand menacingly.

"Morgan Jeffries, editor," Kieran replied, wrinkling his brow. He hadn't expected a pop quiz. Jeffries preferred to be called "Jeff" rather than any permutation of his first name; in fact he loathed his first name, so it was best never uttered.

"Okay, good," Jeff replied sardonically, "you noticed that. And what does the sign on *your* office say?"

"I don't have an office?" Kieran replied, knitting his brows and wondering if it was a trick question. The conversation had attracted the attention of his coworkers. Kieran could hear a few people still tap-tap-tapping at their keyboards, but no one spoke.

"Precisely," Jeff said cryptically. The entire room was silent now.

"Are you telling me I'm getting a promotion?" Kieran asked eagerly, his grin widening, flashing his sure-fire dimples.

"Uh, I wonder what the Magic 8-Ball would say about that. All signs point to *fuck no*." Jeff leaned down into Kieran's face, breathing the tuna fish he had for lunch onto Kieran. Snickers and giggles echoed around the room.

"Okay, then what *are* you telling me?" Kieran asked. He didn't consider himself a slow learner, but he still wasn't sure where this was going. He was here and he'd turned in his column—by e-mail—well before the five p.m. deadline.

"Kieran, do you like your job?" Jeff asked, leaning back again. Someone in the far corner snorted and Kieran's eyes darted in that direction without moving his head.

"Yeah." Kieran didn't like the way the conversation was going. He'd been thrown off because Jeff had called him "Kieran." When Jeff was angry at someone he used his surname instead.

"Then what the fuck is *this*?" Jeff demanded, smacking the roll of papers onto Kieran's desk. The sheets fluttered to the floor. Kieran bent down awkwardly to retrieve the document, scanning to see what it was.

"Uh, my column—'Crazy Things People Do to Find Love'—for Sunday's issue." Kieran wrinkled his nose as he looked at the manuscript, squinting slightly and ruffling through the pages. Jeff was old-school and had started at a newspaper, hence the bullpen-style office. Jeff threw papers at some poor schmuck at least once a week. "I guess you don't like it,"

Kieran said as meekly as he could manage. He didn't want to antagonize his boss in front of the entire department.

"No, I 'don't like it,'" Jeff replied, mimicking Kieran's voice. "It's too fucking nice, for fuck's sake! Fuck, Kieran!" Jeff liked to say "fuck," and averaged about one use per sentence. He was clearly making up for lost "fucks" so far in this conversation.

"Nice?"

"Too fucking nice," Jeff repeated. "We don't pay you to write nice interesting little columns with heart and hope and happy endings. We pay you to be bitchy and snarky and enter-fucking-taining, for fuck's sake. This is bo-ring! I wouldn't use it wrap dog shit in! Come on! You talked to matchmakers and psychics and speed-fucking-daters and more crazy-ass lovelorn sons of bitches, and there was a fucking *fuckload* of potential for snark here, and you end up writing some fucking sympathetic piece about how hard it is to find 'love in the big city.'" Jeff mocked. "Fix it the fuck up or pack your fucking desk and get a job at *Redbook* or *Ladies' Home Fucking Journal*. Got it?"

"Fuck yes?" Kieran ventured with a grin. Jeff didn't return the smile. He had managed to say "fuck" 14 times; *a personal best for one conversation*, Kieran mused. When he started working here, he found himself counting "*fucks*" rather than paying attention to what Jeff was actually saying. After three years of practice, Kieran could listen and count "fucks" at the same time.

"Deadline is five p.m., which gives you four hours to get me a new draft. Or to pack. Your choice, Quinn." Jeff stormed

back to his office. Eyes followed Jeff until he slammed the door behind him. Then everyone stared at Kieran.

"Thanks, all y'all, for your concern about my well-being," Kieran said in his sweetest, most drawling native Texas accent. "Now mind your own fucking business!" He added in his normal, only barely-a-trace-of-an-accent-voice, and smiled a huge, pleasant and clearly facetious smile, showing most of his large and very pearly whites.

Kieran booted up his computer and opened the file to edit his column. Slowly, the room returned to its normal level of noise and activity. Everyone was used to Jeff's weekly tirades, but Kieran hadn't been the object of Jeff's disaffection for quite a while. A lot of the other staffers thought he deserved it, the way he swanned in—never swished, despite what some people might say—at all hours of the day and consistently turned things in at the last minute. But no one disputed he was one of the most talented and most popular writers—at least with the readers—at *Gloss*. His columns invariably generated hundreds of letters and e-mails, a mixture of plaudits and complaints, but the magazine didn't care, as long as people were buying and reading it. The circulation department discovered a good number of people bought the thing just for Kieran's column.

The company intentionally didn't post Kieran's columns on *Gloss's* Web site in order to force people to buy the magazine. The tactic worked. Circulation was at an all-time high: Quite a feat, given the Internet had caused most magazines and newspapers to lose huge portions of their print readership.

Almost four hours later, Kieran had been to the coffee cart in the lobby three times and was so hopped up on sugar and caffeine he couldn't sit still. He furiously tapped away at his keyboard, banging one knee rhythmically against his desk, and occasionally muttering to himself. Several co-workers stared at him, probably wishing Kieran hadn't shown up in the office after all. The feature writers had the option of working at home a couple of days a week, if their jobs allowed—the news writers clearly couldn't—but everyone was expected to be in the office on the day of deadline; preferably before noon. The room now was nearly empty, as the writers who had already turned in their stories went home or off to live their lives.

"So, Kieran, how's the rewrite going?" Chad Raines asked from a few desks away. He was Kieran's closest friend at *Gloss*, and possibly outside of work, as well. He reviewed films for the magazine's entertainment section. Kieran imagined Chad's job consisted of sitting around in the dark watching movies all day, then coming in on deadline day to turn in his columns. But Chad probably only got half the salary Kieran did. Chad looked and sounded like a California surfer: light brown hair streaked with golden highlights, which was odd considering he'd come from Vermont. Maybe he'd watched too many films and was just playing the part.

"Great, Chad," Kieran replied with mock-enthusiasm, not looking up from his monitor. "It's the best fucking thing I've written."

"Really?" Chad asked. Irony was usually lost on him.

"No, Chad, it's going to end up like Franken-fucking-stein when I'm done. A little of this and a little of that, all sewn up with some bitchy snarkiness, and then some snarky bitchiness with a dollop of irony and sarcasm on top for good measure."

"So what's got your thong in a twist, dude?"

"I don't know, Chad," Kieran replied, sighing deeply and sprawling back in his chair. He pushed off from his desk and rolled the seat backwards into the desk directly behind him. Alexa Harrington, *Gloss*' restaurant reviewer and another of his good friends, sat there. She grabbed a handful of Kieran's hair. He yelped.

"For fuck's sake, Lex, that fucking hurt!" Kieran shouted, rubbing his head, but his smile said he wasn't really angry.

"Hm, sounds like Mr. Grumpy Pants is trying for Jeff's job or something," Alexa said with a laugh. She spent most of her time in New York, but every other week she spent a few days in another city to try new restaurants, interview celebrity chefs, and follow up on food and taste trends around the country. Kieran was sure she had the best job at the magazine; and Alexa was sure he had only befriended her so he could eat fantastic food for free. She usually ordered five appetizers and five entrees at each restaurant, plus a few desserts; *someone* had to eat all that extra food, Kieran reasoned to her. Slim, petite, elegant Alexa could actually pack away a lot more than anyone might expect, but not *that* much.

"I just don't feel right making fun of some of the people I interviewed for this piece," Kieran admitted. "This

matchmaker, for example. She was the sweetest little grandmotherly thing. She actually did remind me of my grandmother. I can't bring myself to mock her."

"So, just mock the people who *go* to her," Chad suggested. "Or maybe you should have interviewed a few different matchmakers so you would have one you didn't like that you could really rip to shreds."

"I'm surprised people even *agree* to let you interview them," Alexa said. "You're known for making people the butt of jokes or embarrassing them. How do you manage to convince anyone to talk to you?"

"It's his country boy charm and good looks," Chad answered, "and the killer smile. I'm still in awe of the way you can get nearly anyone to not only want to get in your pants, but to think they actually have a chance: male, female, any age or sexual orientation. What's your secret?"

Kieran didn't bother to protest. He *did* abuse that ability, thanks to his mixture of good looks, hours spent in the gym, and a genuinely engaging personality. But he was the first to admit he'd been pretty lazy on this piece. He definitely should have interviewed more people, but was taken with the matchmaker and spent too much time chatting with her. She was quite successful at pairing up couples, many of whom had stayed together for years. Kieran had half-considered asking her to help *him*, since he had no luck finding love in the big city. The night before aside. Then again that wasn't love, that was *fucking*, he reminded himself, and he knew the difference.

The whole theme of the column had hit a bit too close to home for him, and he'd gone into it with entirely too much empathy for who Jeff called the "lovelorn sons of bitches." Kieran thought he could use some help in that department himself. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life picking up hot guys from bars. He really did want to find someone special and settle down, but he seemed to be much more successful with the underwear models than with anyone who could actually be his soulmate.

He'd had a lot of fun interviewing the psychic, too. She did readings out of her tiny apartment in Brooklyn and he'd gone over there twice after the initial visit, rather than just calling her. Of course he didn't really believe in any of that paranormal stuff, and he knew she used attention to detail to "read" his personality and what his problems might be, but she had said something that had gotten his attention. He was going to meet his soul mate sometime soon, she predicted, and it would be a complete surprise to both of them. The person would be seeking Kieran's help for a serious problem, she continued, mentioning something cryptic about a "baby who wasn't there," whatever *that* meant.

"Earth to Quinn," Chad said, startling Kieran out of his thoughts. "You've got less than half an hour to finish that column and get your topic for the next issue outlined. Are you going to manage it?" *Gloss* had writers plan out their work two issues in advance so they could manage space and advertising requirements.

"Huh? The outline is due *today*?" Chad had Kieran's full attention. "I thought that wasn't due until tomorrow?" An

extra 24 hours could do wonders in Kieran's experience. Hell, he'd written entire columns in less time.

"Oh, right, you weren't here the other afternoon when Jeff announced the new schedule," Alexa said. "Now we have to turn in the new outline along with the story for the current issue. I guess bankers'—make that underwear models'—hours can be a bitch, huh?" she teased. She knew him all too well.

"Figures," he complained. "He probably said that just because I wasn't here."

"Well, there was an e-mail, too," Chad said.

"I never read emails from Jeff," Kieran said, a touch of concern creeping into his voice. A lot of Jeff's e-mails ended up in the spam folder, filtered out for having the word "fuck" in there. Kieran hoped he hadn't deleted everything in the trash folder in his e-mail program. He wondered what else he might have missed. Kieran loved research and interviewing people, and of course the writing, but he *hated* the planning and outlining Jeff was so keen on. "I don't have a clue what I'm doing two weeks from now!"

"Well, do you at least have this week's column finished?" Alexa asked. "Or are you gonna pack your fucking desk?"

"Yeah, just about done," Kieran said, wheeling himself back to his desk and taking one more look at what he hoped was the finished column. Just then a trim, good-looking guy with dark, shoulder-length hair approached Kieran's desk, delivering mail from a pushcart.

"Hi, Kieran," Chris-the-mailroom-guy said cheerfully. That was how most people referred to him. "I can't wait to read your next column; I hear it's about finding love." He was

obviously flirting. Kieran tried not to glare at him, and flashed a toned-down version of his normal smile. He didn't want Chris getting the wrong idea—although it was probably far too late to avoid that.

"Yeah, Chris, something like that, if I can get it done in the next ten minutes," Kieran said in a tone that let Chris know the conversation was over without directly snubbing him. Chris didn't seem to notice the undertone and headed to the next desk, swaying his hips. Kieran rolled his eyes and turned back to the monitor, ignoring the huge pile of mail Chris dropped on his desk.

"Looks like love might have found you, Kieran," Chad said with a smirk once Chris was out of earshot.

"No, Chad," Alexa said, laughing. "That wasn't love, that was fucking." She mimicked Kieran's voice almost perfectly as she uttered one of his key phrases.

"Hey, do we have to have this conversation here, *now*?" Kieran asked, exasperated his personal life was common knowledge around the room. He looked around and realized the three of them were the only ones still left, except for the book reviewer—the short, balding Eric Johnson or Thomson or something equally as generic and forgettable—whose desk was over in the corner. Eric had a crush on Alexa and usually stayed until she left. He'd hardly ever even spoken to her, and Kieran always dared her to ask him out or unbutton her top in front of his desk. Alexa didn't go much for dares, but every now and then she'd glance over at Eric and he'd scurry around his desk looking for something, or hide his head in his book.

"I still think it's so fucking hilarious you went home with Chris-the-mailroom-guy from a bar, and *then* found out he worked here!" Chris cried with a laugh. "And he's got the biggest crush on you. I'll bet a week's salary he followed you to that bar in the first place, hoping you'd pick him up." Chad nearly choked with mirth at Kieran's obvious discomfort.

To Kieran, the whole point of one-night stands was simply that: it was only supposed to be one night. You were supposed to fuck him and forget him. They weren't supposed to show up at your desk everyday making puppy-dog eyes hoping you'd ask them out again. It was no wonder Kieran preferred to work from home as often as possible. If he'd had found any sort of deeper connection with Chris, it wouldn't have ended up as a one-night stand in the first place.

"It's so cute, the two of you together," Alexa added in a saccharine tone. Kieran ignored both of them, focusing instead on finishing his column by the deadline.

"Okay, this is done!" Kieran announced 10 minutes later. He hit the enter key with a flourish and e-mailed the final draft of his column to Jeff. Chad and Alexa applauded.

"What about you guys? Almost done?" Kieran asked.

"Yeah," Chad answered. "Jeff approved my final draft hours ago."

"Me, too," Alexa chimed in. "We're just here offering you moral support."

"And mocking my unfortunate sexual encounters," Kieran added wryly. He smiled, happy his friends stuck around until he got his piece done.

"We'll stay 'til Jeff signs off on the piece, and then we'll let you take us out for drinks to show your gratitude," Chad said.

"I see money does buy companionship, if not respect," Kieran said.

While waiting for Jeff's final approval on his column, Kieran needed to find something to write about for the future issue. He glanced at the pile of letters on his desk. An idea formed in his head. *How about writing about the people who write me letters?* He could pick a few choice ones, call the people up, and speak with them. He would need to figure out what the angle of the piece would be, but figured something would come to him after chatting with a few of them. Kieran grabbed the pile of letters and flipped through them, looking for interesting return addresses or uncommon names that would make good fodder for ridicule.

One envelope made of thick pearly beige paper with a return address of Buckwheat Springs, Texas, caught his eye. Kieran had never heard of the town, and figured it must be one of those wayward spots in the middle of nowhere with a population of five people, 500 cows, and 20 pickup trucks. The envelope smacked of a wedding invitation, but Kieran's mind was a blank.

"Hey, I got invited to a wedding, I think, by one of my readers," Kieran said excitedly. He tore the envelope open and read out loud:

"'Mr. and Mrs. Robert Harris request the pleasure of your company at the marriage of their daughter Danetta and Jaxon'—with a fucking X!—'Lang.' Hell, I don't know these

people. There isn't even a letter in here explaining who they are or why I'm invited."

"Hang on," Alexa said. "Did you say Danetta Harris?"

"Yeah," Kieran said. "Why? What the fuck kind of name is Danetta anyway? Of course she'd have to marry someone with an 'X' in his name."

"I went to college with her," Alexa replied.

Kieran took a good look at the envelope and saw it was addressed to Alexa, not him. *Chris obviously isn't as good at sorting mail as he is at sucking cock*, Kieran thought with a laugh. *Poor guy is going to have to sleep his way to a better job.*

"Sorry, I didn't realize it's actually for you. It was in my pile of letters." Kieran handed over the invitation.

"Well, how interesting," Alexa said, reading it over. "The wedding is next weekend, and I'm just getting an invitation *now*? I guess I was on the second string."

"Are you going to go?" Chad asked, coming over and perching on the edge of Alexa's desk.

"No, for a few reasons," she said. "Firstly, I have to be in Napa that weekend for a winemaker's event."

"Oh, poor thing," Chad moaned. "The agony!"

Alexa ignored him. "Second," she continued, "I'm annoyed to be invited so late. And third, get this. This is the *fourth* wedding invitation I've gotten from Danetta over the past five or six years. And she's *still* not married yet."

"Fourth? What d'you mean?" Kieran asked.

"Well, I missed the first wedding. It was before we were really friends, but I went to the next two. And at all of them

she decided—at the *altar*—she didn't want to get married after all!" Alexa shrieked with laughter.

"You're saying she dumped the guy in the middle of the wedding?" Kieran was dumbfounded.

"Yeah. *Twice*." Alexa couldn't say more because she was laughing so hard. "Well, twice I saw, and then one more time when I wasn't there, but it was while she was still in college."

"Oh, that's hilarious," Chad said. "Well, maybe not for the guy, but to plan a whole wedding and then just wait until the last minute to cut and run?"

"Well, it's too bad if it happens once, but she's done it three times. I haven't gotten an invitation for a couple of years—so maybe now she's serious?"

"Hang on a minute," Kieran interrupted. "I saw this in a movie!" He wondered why Chad hadn't recognized the storyline by now. *Just shows he must be faking it*, Kieran decided. "Does this chick think she's Julia Roberts or something? I mean come on, no one does something like that for real."

"Danetta has," Alexa replied. "Yeah, it does sound like that movie, doesn't it? Stupid film. I hated it."

"Lex, you should go just in case," Chad suggested. "Richard Gere might be there!" he added, proving he'd least heard of the film.

"Shut up, Chad!" Alexa laughed.

"What kind of shit-for-brains guy would even date her; much less propose to her with that track record?" Kieran wondered aloud, shaking his head in disbelief. "Guys, I'm

getting an idea here. I can do a column on the wedding! What do you think?"

"What's the angle?" Chad asked.

"I could focus on Danetta, and how she's such a flake. She *is* a flake, right Lex?"

"First class."

"That could work, but it doesn't quite do it for me," Chad said. "Real-life *Runaway Bride*; that's not exactly original, is it? You need some other spin to make it fly."

"Okay." Kieran paused, the wheels turning in his head as he sought a more original slant that would be snarky enough to a travel budget approved. "Okay, okay, how's this? I focus on the guy. Guys, I guess. I can interview the first three to try finding out what her secret is for getting all these proposals. Then I can focus on the current one—what's his name?"

"Jaxon," Alexa read from the invitation.

"Danetta and Jaxon. How on earth do people come up with these names for their kids in that town? I never heard of either of those names. But anyway, so I hang out with Jaxon a couple of days before the wedding, see how he's dealing with the uncertainty of whether she will or won't actually marry him."

"Yeah, that's good," Chad said encouragingly. "What about something on how to avoid this happening to you?"

"Good, good." Kieran was on a roll now with their brainstorming. "And of course it will be easy to make him look like a fool for even asking her to marry him, considering her

past behavior. And if she bails again, I can really go to town on him."

"Kieran, I think you've done it," Alexa said. "Now hurry up! Write up the proposal, send it off to Jeff, and let's get to the bar."

"She's having cosmo withdrawal, I can tell," Chad said.

"I am so over cosmos, Chad," she chided him. "It's pomegranate martinis now."

They leaned over Kieran's shoulders as he outlined his idea, correcting his punctuation and mocking his overuse of adverbs while he tried to type. He did his best to ignore them, and when he was fairly satisfied with the proposal he emailed it Jeff.

"So, Kieran, tomorrow let me call Danetta and tell her you'll be going to the wedding in my place," Alexa offered.

"That'd be great, thanks, Lex," Kieran replied. "I'm going to have to spin it differently for her if I want to get a chance to interview her and Jordan before the wedding."

"Jaxon," Chad and Alexa corrected.

"Jordan was actually the name of groom number two," Alexa said.

"Whatever. So, how about if you tell her I'm there to do a column about how this time she's so sure, and how in love they are and..." Kieran stopped talking, eyes on the ceiling. "Hey, could she be pregnant? 'Cause if she is, she might be more likely to go through with it this time. That would fuck everything up for the story."

"Well, I'll see if I can find out when I talk to her," Alexa said.

"Anyway, we'll make her think my angle is how *this* time it's right, and how special and different things are with Justin. He's *totally* Mr. Perfect," Kieran mocked.

"Jaxon," Chad and Alexa said again.

"Yeah, I know. How could I possibly forget a name like that?"

They all turned around when they heard Jeff's door bang open.

"Quinn, in my office, *now*!" Jeff roared out of the open door.

"How about we just meet you at the bar?" Chad suggested. "Boulud okay?"

"Wow, I'm generous tonight, huh?" Kieran asked. He walked toward Jeff's office as his friends gathered their things to go. "How about Brut instead?" Kieran shouted over his shoulder. He'd rather they went to the small champagne bar close to his SoHo apartment rather than the most expensive restaurant in town. There was someone he was hoping to run into there.

"Quinn!" Jeff poked his head out of his door to find himself face-to-chest with Kieran.

"I'm here, Jeff," Kieran said as he looked down at his boss, who was actually more than six feet tall himself.

"Get your ass in here."

Kieran followed Jeff into the office and sat down in one of the chairs facing the desk. Jeff perched himself on the front of his desk and glared down at Kieran.

"Good job on fixing up your lovesick piece. I think it works now," Jeff said, no trace of his earlier anger. Kieran rarely

gave him a reason to get angry and he knew he was actually Jeff's favorite staff writer, though he tried not to let Kieran know it. A little bit of ass-kicking was necessary from time to time to keep him working at his peak, or Kieran had a tendency to get lazy. It was probably also good for the morale of the other staff writers if they didn't think Kieran got special treatment just because he was a star.

"Thanks."

"And your idea for the bride with fucking icebergs for feet? Not bad. But I'm not convinced it'll work. What's your angle if she doesn't do another runner? You can't make either her or the groom look like fucking idiots if they actually tie the fucking knot, can you?"

Three, Kieran counted to himself.

"Well, I thought of that, too," Kieran lied. "If she goes through with it, then I focus on the three discarded grooms and somehow show they weren't good enough or find something wrong with them and why this, uh, Jaxon guy is perfect for her."

"Hm, that could work as your fallback plan. When were you thinking of going out there, to uh, Bumfuck Springs, Texas? That near where you grew up?"

Four.

"Buckwheat Springs. And no. I grew up in San Antonio, which is full of culture and history. It's not some dust-bucket town in the middle of nowhere." Kieran was proud of his hometown, and constantly found himself defending it while in New York. "Alexa will find out about the schedule of wedding events and make sure they'll let me tag along, but I'm

thinking Sunday or Monday. The wedding is next Saturday; spending the week in Buckwheat Springs should give me enough background. I'll also stay for a couple of days after the wedding to follow up on whatever happens."

"Sounds good to me. Just keep all the receipts, and no caviar or champagne on the expense account while you're there. Got it? Like they have caviar in Bumfuck Springs." Jeff cackled.

Five. Jeff was definitely off his game right now.

"Got it," Kieran said, pleased Jeffries seemed to like his idea. He hoped it wasn't completely obvious he'd only thought it up 15 minutes earlier. He owed Chad and Alexa for helping him flesh out his ideas. Then he remembered they were eating and drinking on his tab while he was still sitting there, wondering whether he was out of the doghouse with his boss.

"So, go on, get your ass out of here and meet up with your friends." Jeff dismissed Kieran with a wave of his hand and seated himself at his desk. He began to sift through a pile of papers. "Where the fucking fuck did I put the fucking—" Kieran didn't hear the rest because he was sprinting for his desk to grab his jacket before rushing home to change on the off-chance he ran into his future soulmate—or the next hot underwear model—at Brut.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

Sunday

Texas

Kieran touched down Sunday evening at the airport in Amarillo. His knees ached from the cramped plane. Jeffries wouldn't spring for business class; and by the time Kieran booked his ticket, the flight was nearly full and he hadn't been able to get a front-row seat in coach where there was at least enough room to stretch his legs.

He still had to rent a car for the hour-long drive to Buckwheat Springs, and opted to get the best car available—preferably a convertible. He'd pay the extra charge if Jeffries nitpicked and penny pinched. Kieran had no trouble upgrading at the car rental counter and tossed his suitcase in the trunk of a Chrysler Sebring convertible. He was starved. Kieran asked the car rental clerk where the best diner was in Amarillo and ended up at the Home Plate diner, where he ordered a dinner platter—chicken-fried steak, their specialty—a piece of berry pie, and iced tea for \$12; the price of one cocktail at Brut. Kieran felt himself relax, and slipped into his soft South Texas accent while chatting briefly with his waitress before setting out on the last leg of his journey.

As Kieran drove, he reviewed what he'd learned in his research for the story. Buckwheat Springs was a historical trading post town that in the last decade had restored a lot of its historical buildings and tried to market itself as a "destination." The whole concept was usually a recipe for a

tourist trap, but somehow Buckwheat Springs had managed to make it work without going too far into the realm of artificially quaint. Main Street looked much the way it had 100 years earlier; but the centerpiece of the town was the courthouse, which apparently had an almost identical twin at some equally unremarkable town in Kentucky. Apparently the architect had moved and re-used the blueprints with only minor changes.

But Kieran wasn't there for history or sightseeing. He needed to focus on a strategy for approaching Danetta, Jaxon, and Danetta's trio of jilted grooms.

Danetta had grown up in Buckwheat Springs, leaving when she was 18 to attend the University of Virginia with Alexa. Danetta majored in art history. When she graduated, she returned to Buckwheat Springs and got a job with the Historical Preservation Board. She was involved in maintaining historical accuracy in and attaining international recognition for the traditional Texas trading-post town's tourism marketing campaign. Danetta seemed to be responsible and competent, having held onto the job for five years. Kieran wondered at how someone so professionally competent could be such a disaster when it came to her personal life and relationships.

Jaxon Lang was a transplant to the town. He'd only moved there a year earlier to take a job as the Buckwheat Springs High School's principal. Jaxon had grown up around Dallas, and attended the University of Texas as an undergraduate and graduate student. In his professional life, Jaxon earned a reputation while working high-level positions at two high

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

schools as having a high success rate in improving test scores and college acceptance. Kieran was eager to find out why Jaxon chose to take a job in Buckwheat Springs, which seemed like a professional dead-end for someone like him.

It was nearly midnight in New York, 11 p.m. in Texas, by the time Kieran arrived at the Trail Dust Motel in Buckwheat Springs. He only hoped the motel's name was just meant to conjure up colorful Texas imagery and wasn't any indication of the competence of the housekeeping staff.

"I'm Quinn," he said to the gray-haired woman at the front desk. "I'm sorry for arriving so late."

She shuffled through some papers. "How do you say your first name? Ky—"

"*Keer-un*," he said. He was used to this. He was just glad his mother hadn't used the traditional spelling of Ciaran, otherwise his name would have been mispronounced more than it already was already.

"Mr. Quinn. Kier-an," she ventured, sounding it out slowly. "I'm Marge Connors. Why, look here! Your address says New York, but you talk like you're Texas-born and bred."

"San Antonio," he specified, "but now I work in Manhattan." Kieran could tell already he'd be explaining this all week.

"Well, you must be exhausted after such a long trip." She said, sounding a lot like his mother when he made his all-too-infrequent visits home. Somehow being here and talking with Marge Connors made Kieran think more fondly of home than he had in quite a while. "Breakfast is included," she continued, "but we don't have a fancy restaurant here at the

motel. So if you just show your room key at the Copper Caboose on Main Street, they'll give you a nice meal. I'm particularly fond of their pecan pancakes—you be sure and try those while you're here." She leaned forward as she said the last part, as though sharing a secret with him.

"I'll be sure and do that," Kieran replied. "Thank you, ma'am." *It's true*, he thought bemused, realizing the word "ma'am" had slipped out. *You can take the boy out of Texas, but you can't take Texas out of the boy.*

The room was large and furnished in a homey, old-fashioned way that turned out to be much nicer than he expected. In face he was more than pleasantly surprised since he'd been expecting to find tacky Western décor like stuffed armadillos or cow horns hanging from the walls. Maybe a cowboy-print bedspread rather than this beautifully handmade quilt. So far, his trip had been a nice change of pace from Manhattan, though he knew he still had work to do, and that was why he was here. He needed to focus on Danetta and Jaxon rather than on pancakes and quilts. Kieran unpacked a few things, found his toiletries bag, and washed up for bed. He slid beneath the covers and mentally ran through his schedule for the next day. He was asleep before he getting beyond the pecan pancakes for breakfast.

* * * *

Monday

Kieran waked at 10 a.m. Monday—very early for him. The surprisingly comfortable motel bed left him well-rested, so he decided to get up and start his day. After a quick shower,

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

Kieran dressed and wandered down the street to the Copper Caboose for some of those pecan pancakes Mrs. Connors recommended.

On his way to breakfast, Kieran got his first good look at the town of Buckwheat Springs. As expected, Main Street had the architectural air of Victorian-era Texas. There was a moderate hustle and bustle of people who waved or nodded as Kieran passed. Shops and restaurants had old-fashioned or Western-themed names. He tried not to scoff at the quaintness of everything.

There weren't many cars traveling down Main Street, and it seemed Buckwheat Springs was largely navigable by foot. Only people living near the outskirts of town would probably take their car—or truck, more likely—on a regular basis.

The Copper Caboose was a small hole-in-the-wall restaurant, bright and clean, and decorated in a railroad theme. Kieran seated himself at a table near the window looked over a menu already on the table.

"Good morning!" a disturbingly perky waitress said, rushing over to his table with a pot of coffee. She was petite, blonde, probably in her early 30's, and wore a nametag that said "Natalee." Kieran watched Natalee pour coffee into his mug, which had a picture of a caboose on it. "Welcome to Buckwheat Springs!" she cried. "Let me know when you're ready to order."

"I already know what I want," Kieran said. "Pecan pancakes, double order, side of bacon, large orange juice, and fruit salad if you have it."

"Hang on, I need another pad to write all that down," Natalee said with a laugh and a pretty smile. Kieran chuckled. "Anything else?" she prompted.

"That'll do—for now." Natalee giggled. Her laugh suited her.

"You're that reporter from New York, aren't you?" Natalee asked, her tone bordering on flirtatious.

"Columnist," Kieran corrected her. "But yes, I am he. Kieran Quinn." He held out his hand to shake hers. She took it timidly.

"Well, aren't you Mr. Big City Grammar, Kieran," she replied. "What's the difference?"

"Reporters report what they see or research, but I write what I think about things. You know, my opinions and observations. More subjective."

"And what are your observations so far?" Natalee teased, shifting her weight and cocking her hip in a way that made Kieran uncomfortable. He didn't mind a little flirtatious banter, but the last thing he wanted was for her to start hitting on him. If he had to make his disinterest clear, he would have a much harder time getting her to gossip.

"Natalee, are you gonna bring me that order or telegraph it by ESP?" the cook shouted from behind the counter.

"Sorry, coming!" She flashed an apologetic smile at Kieran before heading toward the kitchen with her own caboose shimmying, to turn in her order. She returned momentarily with orange juice in a tall glass and a bowl of fresh fruit salad. Kieran had his head buried in a discarded newspaper he found

at the next table, partly to read it and partly to avoid more conversation with Natalee.

"Here you go," she said. "Enjoy!"

"Thanks," Kieran replied, not looking up from the paper.

A few minutes later the rest of Kieran's breakfast arrived. Natalee appeared ready to watch him eat, but the comings and goings of other customers kept her occupied. She didn't have any extra time for Kieran except to offer a refill of coffee, which he gratefully accepted.

The pecan pancakes were delicious as advertised: large and fluffy, and full of chunks of pecan that added a delightful crunch to the pancakes. There was real butter and maple syrup, and Kieran felt he was in breakfast heaven. The fruit salad was fresh, the bacon thick and meaty and not burned to a crisp. Kieran didn't really like to make it a habit to be awake at breakfast time if he could help it; but if he had to be, he wanted the breakfast to be good.

Kieran had finished eating and was pushing the plates away when the bell on the door jingled and the most beautiful man he'd ever seen walked into the restaurant. *Make that most beautiful person*, Kieran amended. He'd never seen anyone—man or woman—more attractive. The man was just taller than six feet, with short, sun-streaked brown hair. His eyes—bright greenish-hazel, slightly heavy-lidded, but in a sexy, just-fucked way—mesmerized Kieran; and a plush, full-lipped mouth gave Kieran an immediate hard-on. The man wore a Wedgwood-blue button-down shirt fitted closely enough to make it clear that he spent time at the gym and

took good care of his body. And he walked directly toward Kieran.

In almost the same moment, Kieran noticed out of the corner of his eye that a woman had come in with the man and followed him over to Kieran's table.

"Are you Ky, Kee..." the woman started to say, then gave up. Kieran's eyes were glued to the beautiful man.

"Keer-un," the man said. "It's Gaelic, right?" Kieran smiled, noticing caramel-colored freckles scattered over the fair-skinned nose and cheeks of the man.

"Yes, it is," Kieran replied, worried he had a stupid grin on his face. "You're probably the only person in town who can pronounce it besides me," *Of course, he thought, someone with an "X" in his name like Jaxon would be sensitive to another person with an even slightly unusual name.*

"Well, I'm Danetta Harris," the woman said, shoving her way in front of Jaxon and blocking Kieran's view. "And this is Jaxon Lang, my fiancé." She put out her hand to shake Kieran's. He felt obligated to take it.

"Jaxon," the man said, offering his own hand, and Kieran took it, prolonging the contact, enjoying the firm grip.

"Nice to meet you both," Kieran said, still not really looking at the woman. Without asking, she sat herself down in one of the chairs opposite Kieran. Jaxon sat down at the side of the table to Kieran's left, his knee slightly grazing Kieran's as he settled himself into the chair. Kieran felt a jolt of electricity at the contact and fought to keep his attention on the conversation.

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

"Alexa Harrington told me you'd be coming to town early because you wanted to do an article on our wedding," Danetta began. "I'm not really familiar with *Gloss*. It sounds like it's a fashion mag like *Vogue* or *Marie Claire*?" she asked, clearly excited at the idea of her wedding being featured in one of those magazines. "You have a photographer coming, too?"

"I take my own photographs," Kieran said. *Not that I ever use any in my columns.* "And 'gloss' actually has another definition: commentary or interpretation. It's meant to be an intellectual play on words: one connotation indicates shallowness while the other is almost opposite in meaning."

Jaxon smiled at Kieran's explanation. Danetta looked blank.

"Very clever," Jaxon agreed, nodding. "We thought it would be a good idea to introduce ourselves to you now, and—"

"We wanted see if you wanted, you know, to do interviews or something, so we could schedule things for you, to help you out," Danetta concluded. Neither of them seemed to be able to use any other pronoun besides *we*.

Jaxon. Kieran thought, *might be the most beautiful name I've ever heard; even with the fucking "X."* He forced himself to snap out of this daydream in order to participate in the conversation without drooling over Jaxon Lang.

"That's very accommodating," Kieran replied. "How did you know I was here?"

"Natalee called and told us," Danetta answered. "She knew we wanted to meet you as soon as possible. Everyone in town is on the lookout for you."

"You probably feel like you're being stalked," Jaxon said with a laugh. "Well, you are. I'm very sorry about that, but you're the biggest thing to happen to this town in a long time." Jaxon paused, "In more ways than one. I mean, we heard you're quite tall," he tried to explain, a look of embarrassment crossing his face. "And everyone in town loves Danetta, so they're all very excited for our big day." Jaxon turned and gave Danetta a dopey, lovey-dovey smile that made Kieran want to puke up the fantastic breakfast he'd just eaten.

"So, your article is about how even though I was engaged before," Danetta said, "that now I'm sure I've found true love with Jaxon. Right?" Kieran liked how she put it—engaged, as opposed to actually *had three weddings*. "And you want to meet the three men I didn't marry, so you can what, compare them to Jaxon?"

"Well, I admit that's part of it," Kieran started. "I also want to hear from you about how you know it's right *this* time, and how you knew it wasn't right before, and, uh, decided not to go through with it."

"You don't need to beat around the bush, Kieran. You can say that I left them at the altar," Danetta said with a pretty laugh. As much as Kieran had wanted to hate her, he liked her frankness and ability to laugh at herself.

"I thought maybe later on today you could spend some time with me while I check on the progress of a home that's

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

being restored," she said. "It will give you a chance to meet Tom Whitfield, the builder. He was my high school sweetheart, and the first man I almost married. I need to discuss a few things with him, and then I can leave you with him for a while. How does that sound?"

"That sounds great," Kieran replied, genuinely glad everyone seemed to want to talk to him. He could interview people and get them to reveal things they hadn't expected to, and not feel resentful toward him for making them do it. Kieran made people grateful for the chance to tell him their most personal secrets; that was how he was so good at his job. Then he took that information and twisted it around so he could ridicule them. That's what made his columns so entertaining. He hated how easily he could rip people to shreds using their own words, but it was some sort of gift.

"This evening we'd like to have you over for dinner at our house," Jaxon said. "Danetta's parents will be there as well, so you can get a picture of us as a family. Are you free tonight?"

Kieran wished he could hear Jaxon say those four words in an entirely different context. "Sounds perfect," he replied.

"Well, I need to get back over to the high school before they burn the place down," Jaxon said, standing up. Danetta also stood, and Jaxon gave her a kiss before turning toward the door. "See you at dinner," he said, looking over his shoulder at Kieran before walking out.

"I'll come get you around two o'clock at the motel, okay?" Danetta asked. Kieran agreed. As she walked toward the door, Kieran noticed for the first time that her skirt was

almost the same color as Jaxon's shirt. *Jesus fucking Christ*, he thought. *Matching outfits?*

Kieran had one more cup of coffee before getting up from his table. "How much do I owe?" he asked Natalee.

"Nothing," she said. "Breakfast is included when you stay at the Trail Dust."

"Well, I had a pretty big breakfast. I must owe something extra for that."

"Don't worry; you're like a VIP in town anyway. I doubt you'll be paying for many meals around here."

Kieran had forgotten to show his key when he came in; but apparently everyone in town knew his business. He pulled out his wallet to leave a tip. At first he grabbed a \$20 bill, thinking it would be nice to leave big tip. Concern that Natalee would get the wrong idea inspired Kieran to put it back and take out a five instead.

"Thanks," he said, and headed for the door.

"See you at breakfast tomorrow!" Natalee called after him.

* * * *

Kieran spent the next several hours at another little restaurant down the street, Buck's, drinking coffee, chatting with locals, and making notes on his first meeting with Jaxon and Danetta. He'd have to spend much more time with them to get a good picture of their relationship. He took the opportunity to ask seemingly innocuous questions of the people he chatted with and took notes. Occasionally he felt his attention wandering, thinking about Jaxon as he listened and doodled on his notepad, and he practically had to stop

himself just as he was about to draw a heart around Jaxon's name.

As beautiful as Jaxon was, Kieran had to admit that he didn't see anything special about him yet; and was in fact disappointed with how average the man seemed. He recalled the matching outfits and reactively rolled his eyes. Kieran would need to get Jaxon alone—not *quite* the way he'd like—to find out his real personality. He'd suggest going out for few drinks at a local watering hole after dinner. That would help Kieran figure out whether or not Danetta would decide Jaxon was the man she'd actually marry.

Despite his large and late breakfast, Kieran was soon hungry again and ordered two sandwiches and a plate of curly fries. The lunch crowd had come and gone while Kieran sat at the lunch counter talking to a steady stream of Wheaties (as Kieran decided he'd call the town residents) about Danetta, her previous weddings, and what they thought of Jaxon. Kieran took copious notes, which seemed to thrill everyone.

* * * *

It was nearly 2 p.m. when Kieran tried to pay his tab and was refused with a smile. Kieran was on his way back to the hotel to meet Danetta, when he ran into her on the street.

"Kieran, how was your day so far?" she asked pleasantly.

"Great! I met a lot of people and collected a bunch of juicy quotes. You're quite well-known around town, aren't you?"

"Famous or infamous?" she laughed. "I don't mind. I hope people were helpful. It's just a short walk to the house I was telling you about."

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

After a five-minute stroll, they came upon a lovely Victorian-era house set back on a shady side street filled with similar houses in various degrees of repair. A number of pickup trucks were parked in front, and the sound of hammering and sawing could be echoed down the block. The house was as beautiful as any Victorian in San Francisco.

They entered the house and went through to the back garden area. "Tom!" Danetta called. A tall, well-built man turned around and gave a friendly wave.

"Kieran Quinn, this is Tom Whitfield," she introduced. They shook hands.

Tom had fair skin and grey-green eyes, but was far less beautiful than Jaxon. Kieran could see dark, nearly black hair under Tom's hardhat.

"So Kieran," Tom said, "you came all the way from New York City to write an article about Danetta and Jaxon's wedding? How can it possibly be interesting enough to warrant that? Who would even want to read about it?"

"You have to admit it's an unusual situation," Kieran answered, "with three unfinished weddings behind her. I'm trying to focus on why this time it's actually going to happen. I hope that doesn't offend you, seeing as how it didn't work out between the two of you."

"Oh, I don't hold any of that against Danny," Tom said graciously. "I'm really happy for her and Jaxon. Our girl here deserves to be happy, and I know she and Jaxon are great together." Tom put his arm around Danetta and gave her a squeeze before laying a surprisingly tender kiss on the top of her head.

Kieran couldn't believe that Tom could be so forgiving. Danetta looked up at Tom with a small smile and a look flashed between them that Kieran tried to read. Something special shared, with a hint of sadness and trust.

"Kieran, why don't you follow us around while we discuss our business? Then you and I can spend some time alone after Danetta leaves. You both need to wear hardhats in the house, though." Tom grabbed two hats from his makeshift desk and handing them out.

Properly protected, the three of them entered the house. Danetta and Tom walked side-by-side through the building site discussing the progress of the work while Kieran followed, occasionally asking questions about the building and their friendship. He scribbled notes when they stopped to look at something in particular. Kieran couldn't believe they could still be so close and friendly. *Either Danetta isn't as bad as I thought, Kieran mused, or Tom Whitfield was some kind of emotional superhero.*

When the tour was finished, Danetta left Kieran with Tom.

"Give my best to Jamie," Danetta said as she was leaving.

"Sure thing," Tom replied. "She doesn't think she can possibly survive another three weeks until the baby..." Tom's voice faded out a bit at the end and he left his thoughts unfinished or so it seemed to Kieran. Danetta quickly turned and walked away.

"Jamie's my wife," Tom explained to Kieran. "We've been married two years now, and we're expecting our first baby soon."

"Congratulations," Kieran said.

The men spent an hour talking, interrupted occasionally when Tom needed to speak with different members of the construction crew. The basic story was that Tom and Danetta were high school sweethearts and decided to get married between her third and fourth years at UVA. But it wasn't really the right thing at that time, and Danetta ran out. Tom had been heartbroken at first, but realized it was the right decision. Since then, he'd turned his construction foreman's job into owning his own building company, and did very well for himself in town—especially with all the restoration projects Danetta steered in his direction. Kieran asked progressively more intrusive questions, but Tom answered all of them, never once saying anything critical of Danetta or Jaxon. Kieran figured he'd need to pour a few drinks down his throat, too, before being able to scratch the surface of Tom Whitfield.

"So, what was Danetta's explanation for why she waited until the middle of your wedding ceremony to decide it wasn't going to work out?" Kieran asked. He'd wanted to say "excuse," but thought that might sound a bit too hostile.

"The reason for that is really quite personal, Kieran, and I'm afraid I can't discuss it with you," Tom said, though he didn't seem evasive. It sounded as if he really did not want to expose Danetta's personal and private emotions without her consent. "I don't hold it against her at all. The reason she gave me was perfectly acceptable, and that's why I don't have any hard feelings about it—and why I am thrilled she's found Jaxon."

When they wrapped up their conversation, Tom said he would take Kieran over to meet Jordan Hartley, or "Number

Two" as they liked to tease him. It turned out that the three jilted grooms were all quite friendly with each other, and were also among Jaxon's closest friends in town. This all was a bit too much for Kieran to believe. Maybe they were all putting on a show for him, but they couldn't keep it up all week. He'd be able to tell pretty quickly what was real around here and what wasn't.

A 10-minute walk through the center of town later, Tom and Kieran arrived at the station where Jordan Hartley was a fireman. Tom introduced Jordan to Kieran, and left after exchanging a few pleasantries. They seemed to Kieran to really be friends.

"Kieran," Tom said before he left, "say hello to Jaxon for me later on, okay?"

"Sure thing," Kieran agreed.

Jordan's story was a bit different. He'd met Danetta when she was doing a month-long seminar in Austin at UT about Texas architecture of the Victorian period. They'd hit it off, and began a relationship strong enough to continue after Danetta returned home. After trying things long-distance for a while, Jordan relocated to Buckwheat Springs, moved in with Danetta, and proposed. Kieran pretty much knew the rest of the story.

Jordan's wedding with Danetta went as well as Tom's had. Jordan also refused to share the reason Danetta gave for jilting him, but said he understood and thought it was all for the best. He furthermore said he wished Jaxon and Danetta nothing but happiness. Before long, Danetta came by the fire station to pick Kieran up and bring him home for dinner.

"Say hi to Jaxon for me," Jordan requested, and gave Danetta a look almost identical to the one Tom had given her: one of shared secrets and genuine affection with a hint of sadness and regret. Kieran jotted down a few notes before he and Danetta left.

Danetta shared more town lore with Kieran as they walked to a cute little Victorian home she shared with Jaxon. Kieran half-listened as he thought about what he learned so far. Tom and Jordan seemed to still have some feelings for Danetta, but this didn't seem to affect their ability to care chiefly about her happiness. Kieran detected no hints of jealousy—in fact, he was surprised to learn that they really liked Jaxon. Or were they all brain-dead from some Danetta magic potion? Perhaps she was a witch. He'd need to be careful what he ate or drank at dinner tonight, Kieran decided.

* * * *

The house Danetta and Jaxon shared was lovely from an architectural standpoint, but the interior decorations were too flowery and feminine for Kieran's taste. Danetta introduced Kieran to her parents and they all made small talk until Jaxon arrived a few minutes later. Danetta's mother had cooked dinner, since Danetta didn't have time to come home and cook a proper welcome meal for Kieran because of some problem or other that had cropped up after leaving Kieran with Tom.

Kieran couldn't wait for the meal to end, between Danetta's parents' near-constant bickering—though mostly one-sided—and incessant kissing between Jaxon and Danetta.

Much of the conversation involved Danetta telling Kieran about the upcoming wedding in excruciating detail. She kept saying "we wanted this" or "we decided on that," though Kieran doubted Jaxon had had much of an opinion on the topic; but Jaxon nodded and agreed as though he'd rather plan a wedding than have tickets for seats on the 50-yard line at a Cowboys game.

Kieran was losing respect for Jaxon fast; but to be fair, Danetta initiated most of the offensive smoochiness. He didn't seem to mind, however, and participated fully. Kieran found the scene wholly inappropriate considering he was a guest the couple had just met.

Danetta's mother, Lorraine, was at least 50 but tried to act and dress like a 20- or 30-year old. Kieran chalked this up at least in part to the huge amount of alcohol she had apparently consumed before he arrived. She had on too much makeup, wore horribly frilly clothes, and had old-fashioned Big Texas Hair. She berated Danetta's father, Bert, every chance she got. For his part, Bert seemed like the kind of guy who looks up to a doormat. The man was innocuous; nearly invisible. They were easily the most dysfunctional couple Kieran had seen outside of television. They were a walking advertisement for divorce.

The food was barely edible. There was a hard disk of meat covered in a dark brown sauce with the consistency of school paste.

"Kieran, honey," Lorraine said. "You've hardly touched your pork chop."

Pork chop? he thundered in his head. *More like a reject from the quality control line at a hockey puck factory.* "Sorry," he said, "I'm actually trying to become a vegetarian. I try to limit the amount of meat—"

"Well, in that case, have some more potatoes!" Lorraine piled on more of the runniest mashed potatoes Kieran had ever seen. Kieran could feel his blood pressure rising as he slurped down a spoonful of the salty mixture. He hoped Danetta hadn't learned her culinary skills from her mother, or Jaxon would starve or be poisoned before their first anniversary. As it was, Jaxon barely touched his dinner.

As soon as was decent, Kieran tried to extricate himself from the dinner party—a very loose term as far as the evening was concerned. He wanted to figure out a way to ask Jaxon to go out for a drink, so he could see for himself what Jaxon was really like. Kieran wasn't sure that anything was real inside that house; he certainly hoped it wasn't.

"I hope you won't think it's rude," Kieran ventured as they moved into the living room after dinner. Danetta's father was clearing the table and apparently doing the dishes. "I was hoping I could steal Jaxon away for an hour or two and—"

"Good idea, Kieran," Jaxon agreed, interrupting not only Kieran but Danetta, who had her mouth open to speak. "We haven't had a chance for a one-on-one interview yet."

"Is there someplace to get a beer or something around here?"

"Yeah, we can check out the Lone Star Bar, over on Third Street," Jaxon replied. They were on their way five minutes later.

"Do you want to grab some dinner, too?" Jaxon offered with a smile as they headed, again on foot, for the center of town.

"Fuck, yeah!" Kieran replied and was rewarded with a deep laugh from Jaxon. *Maybe he's not such a robot, after all.*

"We'll go to Sam's," Jaxon said. "They serve food and booze."

"Not Lone Star Bar?"

"I just said that because Danny doesn't like Sam's. Mainly because Sam doesn't much like *her*," Jaxon explained. Kieran gave Jaxon a point for having misled Danetta, but he was already minus about a thousand points after that dinner, so it wasn't much of an improvement.

"What's he got against her?" Kieran asked, curious because so far Sam was the only person in town not completely enamored with Danetta.

"Sam's actually not a 'he,' but we're already here," Jaxon said as they entered a place with a sign hanging outside that said simply "Saloon." The men headed for the bar.

"Sam," Jaxon said to the bartender, a woman in her mid-30's with, shoulder-length brown hair and a sly but infectious smile, "meet Kieran Quinn. Kieran, Sam Alexander."

"Good to meet ya, Kieran," Sam said offering her hand and shaking Kieran's with an unexpectedly strong grip. She had a slightly husky voice: the kind that came from too many cigarettes, too much whiskey, or both. It suited her perfectly.

"Same here, Sam," Kieran responded.

"Can I get a cheeseburger, some curly fries, and a couple of beers?" Jaxon asked.

"Same for me," Kieran said.

"A couple of beers for you, too?" Sam asked with a chuckle.

"Let's start with one each," Jaxon said.

"I think I'll have a couple of cheeseburgers, though," Kieran added.

"I thought you were going vegetarian?" Jaxon asked, though from his tone and cocked eyebrow, it was clear he was teasing Kieran.

"I've got ale, pale ale and wheat. What'll it be?"

"Wheat for me," Kieran answered. Jaxon chose ale. They waited while Sam opened bottles, then Jaxon led Kieran over to a tall wooden table toward the back of the bar and they settled themselves on stools. They sat for a few moments in silence while they worked on their beers.

"I never heard of this beer, but it's pretty good," Kieran said, glancing at the label after draining half the bottle.

"Local brewery over in Amarillo. Not bad at all. So what do you think of Buckwheat Springs so far?" Jaxon asked.

"It's full of surprises, actually," Kieran said. Now that they were alone Jaxon seemed to have an interesting personality. Kieran enjoyed gazing at the freckles and sparkly green eyes again. "It's a much nicer and livelier town than I expected. People have been really friendly, and the restoration is fantastic."

"Definitely true. I know I didn't expect much before my first visit, and I found plenty to like about this place." Jaxon paused. "It's not Dallas, but it's really great for a small Texas town."

"If you like having everyone knowing your business all the time," Kieran said.

"That is a drawback, but mostly I like everyone around here."

"How do you get on with the three former fiancés?" Kieran asked. *Might as well get in a few necessary questions here*, he figured, though he would have preferred to just chat with Jaxon and not have feel like work.

"We all get along well, oddly enough. I didn't expect them to like me; I thought they'd be jealous or hold some sort of grudge now that I'm with Danny. But that's not the kind of guys they are. They're probably my closest friends here, believe it or not."

"How are you all able to get along so well?" Kieran asked.

"I think it's because we all care about Danny, and we want her to be happy," Jaxon responded. "They've all realized for one reason or another, things didn't work out with her, but they want her to be with whoever will make her happy. No one's jealous that she seems to think I'm that person."

Just then Sam walked over and set their food and two more beers on the battered surface of the table. She took away their empty bottles from the first round.

As if by mutual consent Jaxon and Kieran ate silently, savoring each bite of food. The burgers were delicious: juicy, thick and char-broiled; with real cheddar and toasted buns. Kieran tried not to think about Jaxon's lips as he watched the man push fries into his mouth. And when Jaxon put his lips around the beer bottle, Kieran wasn't really wishing they were wrapped around his cock instead.

"I'm really sorry about dinner," Jaxon said, breaking the silence. "Lorraine insisted on meeting you, and pretty much invited herself over—dragging Bert along."

Kieran was surprised to hear Jaxon mention Lorraine's domineering personality.

"Unfortunately, I've had worse."

"Danny's mom can't cook to save her life—quite the opposite in fact. So far no one's actually died, though there's a rumor someone did end up in the hospital. But that was before I lived here so I can't say for sure." Jaxon chuckled again. "But Danny never complains; I guess she grew up with Lorraine's cooking and is so used to it she doesn't really notice how bad it is. Luckily Lorraine doesn't cook for us very often. I guess one of Danny's afternoon meetings went much longer than she expected, and she couldn't get home in time to cook. But if I'd known in advance Lorraine was cooking, I would have left school early and made dinner for you myself."

Kieran had emptied his plate. Jaxon had only eaten about half his burger and fries, but seemed to be finished. Kieran eyed the fries, and before he knew it had reached out and grabbed a couple.

"Oh, sorry," Kieran said as he put the fries in his mouth. "That was rude."

"That's fine, help yourself," Jaxon offered without pushing his plate toward Kieran. Kieran felt rude taking it, so he reached over to grab a few more. It seemed an oddly intimate gesture for near strangers, but neither seemed to mind.

"So, tell me the truth." Kieran might as well get this over with. "Are you worried at all about Saturday?"

"No, I'm not." Jaxon replied, without a trace of concern. "I know Danny loves me as much as I love her. Why should I worry?"

"But it's not enough, is it? I mean the other three guys thought exactly the same thing, didn't they?"

"That's true," Jaxon admitted. He frowned as he considered what Kieran said. The expression was fine with Kieran, because Jaxon pushed his bottom lip out a bit; making it look even more lickable. "But I know she's really ready to settle down. With me."

"What makes you so sure? What's different about you?" Kieran probed.

"It's really rather personal, and I don't want to discuss the details, but I'm sure that she and I share something that she didn't share with anyone else. It's enough to give us an unbreakable bond. It's the kind of thing that either breaks up a relationship or makes it strong and permanent."

BDSM? Alien abduction? Liking John Denver? Kieran ticked off a list of curiosities. He also realized how odd it was that Jaxon used nearly the exact same words Tom and Jordan had when they explained why they didn't resent the way Danetta treated them. It wasn't just coincidence, Kieran was convinced. He smelled a good story here, and only needed to dig in the right place to unearth it. He was determined to figure it out by the wedding on Saturday afternoon.

Sam came by to remove their plates, bringing another round of beers. *This woman knows how to take care of her customers*, Kieran thought.

"I just have to say," Kieran said, "I'm relieved that I'll probably never have to go through anything like what you're going through right now, or what happened to the other three. It'll never happen to me."

"Not big on marriage?" Jaxon asked.

"Can't really get married—even if I found someone I wanted to marry." Jaxon wrinkled his brow in confusion. "I'm gay."

"Really?" Jaxon asked, his tone more curious than shocked or disgusted, which Kieran hadn't expected, though it pleased him. He'd taken a chance even mentioning it to someone he barely knew here in Texas, but for some reason Jaxon made Kieran feel like taking chances. Those mesmerizing green eyes had robbed him of normal brain function, but for the time being Kieran wasn't complaining.

"Yeah, really. And right now, same-sex marriage isn't really much of an option except in a few states."

"Or Canada," Jaxon added.

"Right, it's just marriage in Canada, no matter whom you're marrying." Kieran was impressed that Jaxon knew that.

"But there isn't anyone you want to marry?" Jaxon asked.

"Not at the moment," Kieran answered, though in truth, there never had been. Hence Kieran's particular interest in the matchmaker and the rest of the people he'd met researching that last column.

They talked for another hour about all sorts of things, from how Kieran liked New York to baseball, with a few more of Kieran's personal questions—most of them actually for the column, but a few just from personal curiosity—thrown in here and there, in a way that wouldn't make Jaxon suspicious of Kieran's angle for the piece. But Kieran didn't learn anything that would help him unravel the mystery of Danetta's hold over the men of Buckwheat Springs.

"So, what's it like?" Jaxon asked at one point, obviously feeling more relaxed from the effects of the alcohol.

"What's what like?"

"Kissing a guy?"

"Huh?"

"What's it like to kiss a guy? Jesus, you hard of hearing or something?" Jaxon was leaning in close to Kieran and speaking softly, clearly aware that this wasn't a conversation either of them would want overheard. No one was seated near enough to them to be a concern, but Kieran certainly didn't mind that Jaxon closed the space between them.

"No, it's just a strange question, that's all."

"Why?"

"Fuck, you ask more questions than I do, and I get paid for it." Kieran grinned.

"You're obviously not very good at your job, are you?" Jaxon laughed. "So, answer!"

"I don't think of it the way you do, that's why it's hard to answer. I think about kissing someone I'm attracted to, and kissing someone that gets you hot is great."

"Hmm. So what kind of guy attracts you? What about that guy?" Jaxon pointed to a nice looking, well-built blonde sitting across the room at a table with two other men.

"Don't point at people!" Kieran said, grabbing Jaxon's arm. "Fuck, didn't your mother teach you any manners?" But he was laughing, both at Jaxon's pointing and at his apparently insatiable curiosity about Kieran's sex life.

"Aha, that guy must be your type, or you wouldn't make such a fuss," Jaxon teased.

"He's not actually," Kieran replied. He didn't realize that he still had his hand on Jaxon's arm; then, suddenly, he noticed. He could feel heat radiating through the thin cotton of Jaxon's sleeve, though Jaxon didn't seem to even notice Kieran was still touching him. Kieran pulled his hand back, feeling embarrassed by the thoughts racing through his head and traveling rapidly toward his cock. He shifted in his seat as his jeans began to feel uncomfortably tight.

"Oh, you can't fool me, Kieran," Jaxon went on in a taunting tone that only exacerbated the growing problem in Kieran's pants. "Looks like you're kinda shy and blushing over there. Maybe I'm right after all, huh?"

"Fuck off!"

"Anyone else here you're attracted to?" Jaxon asked with a sly smile. Was it Kieran's imagination or did Jaxon just get a lot closer to him? Their legs weren't just brushing together; now Jaxon's leg was brushing up against Kieran's, sending more pleasurable shockwaves to his cock. And Kieran was enjoying that entirely too much. *Is Jaxon doing this on purpose?* Kieran wondered.

"Uh, yeah, a few guys," Kieran replied, trying to decide what to do. Jaxon seemed curious about Kieran in particular—or had he just misinterpreted Jaxon's interest?

"Well, who?" Jaxon insisted. Kieran turned to him, meeting Jaxon's eyes directly, and then wished he hadn't. Those eyes that ranged from green to hazel were at this moment a glittering emerald color that somehow took away Kieran's ability to think and speak, and possibly even breathe. They were beautiful and electrifying. And that was just the man's eyes. Kieran didn't even want to think about his lips, not while he was this close to Jaxon.

"What's it to you?" Kieran asked, hoping that Jaxon hadn't asked out of mere curiosity.

"Well, making conversation, for one. You know, go out drinking with your buds and maybe talk about the hot girls. Only you don't want girls, so I'm trying to accommodate that," Jaxon explained. "Two, I admit I'm just curious. No one in this town is gay, at least not openly, so I don't know much about it. I'm just trying to deepen my knowledge. I'm an educator, remember?" Jaxon's dimples emphasized how much he enjoyed the conversation.

"And you're planning on including this in the curriculum of the local high school?" Kieran teased.

"Okay, you've got me. It has nothing to do with my quest for erudition," Jaxon admitted and glanced at his watch.

"Fuck, it's much later than I realized. I better get home. It's a school night." Kieran couldn't help reveling in the fact Jaxon hadn't mentioned Danetta as the reason he had to get going.

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

"Right. Speaking of school," Kieran began, "would it be okay if I came by your office tomorrow and spent some time with you while you're working? Get an idea of who you are professionally?" When they'd been with Danetta she seemed to control the conversation and Jaxon didn't get much opportunity to show his true personality.

"Sure. How about meeting me at Tumbleweeds for lunch, and then you can come back with me for the afternoon? Most of the trouble happens after lunch anyway, and it might make for a more exciting visit for you if I can suspend someone or break up a fight. I have to impress you somehow," Jaxon added with a grin that went straight to Kieran's crotch—again. "Besides, I get the idea that you're not much of an early riser."

"Not at all," Kieran admitted with a slightly embarrassed smile. "What time tomorrow?"

"Eleven work for you?"

"I can manage to get up in time for that." Kieran grinned. They walked to the bar and Kieran asked for the check.

"On the house," Sam said. Kieran stuffed a \$20 bill into the tip jar before they left.

"I can't get anyone to take my money around here," Kieran complained when they were out on the street.

"Stop carping," Jaxon said and gave Kieran a friendly punch on the arm. "Good night."

"Good night," Kieran said, and turning in the opposite direction from Jaxon and steering himself toward the motel. Back in his room, Kieran spent an hour writing down notes from dinner and the bar. He was distracted by his attraction

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

to Jaxon, but was also pleased to be actively interested in someone, no matter how unattainable. Jaxon was educated, well-read, and interesting to talk to. He *wasn't* particularly interesting when he was with Danetta, however. Kieran was eager to see what Jaxon was like with his students, and how he interacted with the staff. That would give Kieran a much better idea of what kind of man Jaxon was.

He certainly couldn't ignore his definite physical attraction to Jaxon, and luckily, because of the column, Kieran could spend a lot of time with him and not arouse any suspicion. Of course, Kieran thought it was probably one-sided, and that he'd misinterpreted Jaxon's behavior as *attraction*.

Kieran decided to not to blame Jaxon for the kissy-face, lovey-dovey bullshit. Jaxon hadn't mentioned Danetta during their conversation in the bar, except when Kieran specifically asked about her. *Truly pussy-whipped men constantly mention their significant others*, Kieran theorized, *even when it is totally inappropriate*. It seemed Danetta ramped up the PDA at dinner for Kieran's sake, as a means of convincing him she and Jaxon were really in love. Kieran found it suspicious, and was sure Danetta was hiding something.

Kieran got under the covers of the comfortable, fresh-smelling bed. He couldn't get images of Jaxon out of his mind: his beautiful, freckled face and pouty, perfect mouth. The thought of Danetta enjoying Jaxon's body was depressing to Kieran; but so far, he had no proof that she didn't deserve it. Kieran had only his suspicions, and a feeling in the pit of his stomach. He went back to thinking about Jaxon's pink,

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

pillowy lips; and wondered what they would feel like on his cock. Kieran was instantly hard.

It didn't take many strokes for Kieran to come. But afterwards, as Kieran drifted off to sleep, he felt lonelier than ever.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

Tuesday

A knock sounded on Kieran's motel room door. He opened it to find Jaxon standing there. Wordlessly, Jaxon came in and closed the door quickly behind him. Taken completely by surprise, Kieran let Jaxon shove him roughly against the motel room door and kiss him hungrily, Jaxon's fingers playing through Kieran's hair. *That mouth. Those lips.* Kieran wanted to suck on Jaxon's gorgeous lower lip, but couldn't because Jaxon had taken control. Kieran was hard as a rock as Jaxon moaned into his mouth, tongue greedy and demanding. Then Kieran realized Jaxon was actually trying to say something but wouldn't stop kissing Kieran long enough to speak.

"Want. Your. Cock," Jaxon got the words out between kisses, his voice low and breathy, little more than a rumble in the back of his throat. Just the sound of that had Kieran desperate for both of them to get out of their clothing as quickly as possible.

"God, yes," Kieran moaned back, starting to unbutton his shirt.

Jaxon's hands dropped to Kieran's belt, and he leaned away slightly so he could unbuckle it. He kept his hips glued to Kieran's, his erection digging into the other man in a most agreeable way. Kieran helped Jaxon with the button and zipper on his jeans, and soon Kieran's pants and boxers were down around his ankles. Jaxon slid down Kieran's body,

letting his hands travel along Kieran's well-muscled chest and abs before he took hold of Kieran's cock.

Kieran moaned as Jaxon's fingers touched him, and looked down as Jaxon's obscenely beautiful lips parted to take Kieran's cock into his mouth. Jaxon licked and sucked, tonguing the crown of Kieran's cock, poking his tongue into the slit, and making deliciously wet, dirty sounds. Kieran knew he wouldn't last long, and gave himself over to Jaxon's surprisingly skilled mouth. Jaxon used one hand to cup Kieran's balls, while the other wrapped around the base of Kieran's cock. Kieran put his own large hand over Jaxon's, and they stroked together while Kieran held Jaxon's gaze; mischievous green were eyes dark with arousal as they glittered under thick eyelashes.

"So, close," Kieran started to say before he was interrupted by the shrill ring of his cell phone. It was over on the night table by the bed, out of reach. Kieran closed his eyes, concentrating on Jaxon's mouth and hands; but the phone wouldn't stop. Kieran finally opened his eyes to find that Jaxon was gone. *A dream!* Kieran lay in bed, alone, with only his own hand on his painfully hard cock. The phone still rang.

"Fuck!" Kieran muttered, and pressed "ignore." He kept stroking himself, not quite as close to orgasm as he'd been. The phone rang again. Kieran grabbed it and checked the display: Alexa.

"Lex, lemme call you back, okay?" Kieran growled into the phone.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then just listen, it'll only take a minute," she insisted.

"Hang on a sec," Kieran said and let the phone fall to his chest. He turned his attention back to his cock. He tried not to moan as he attempted to finish.

"Kieran!" Alexa's voice was tiny but still audible. "Are you jacking off? I can't believe you!"

Kieran laughed as he came, noisily.

"Kieran! Did you just come? Ew!"

"I told you it was a bad time to call, didn't I?" Kieran asked, picking up the phone again. He grabbed a handful of tissues from the box near the bed and cleaned up. "So what is it?" he asked, almost cheerfully.

"Jesus fucking Christ, I can't believe you made me listen to that!" Alexa said indignantly.

"But you kept listening. You could have just hung up," Kieran reminded her. "You deserve whatever you heard."

"Okay, fair enough. So does this mean I've had phone sex with you?"

"Yes."

"Wow, that makes me the only woman you've had sex with in a long time. I feel really special."

"You should. Now why did you call?"

"I wanted know how your first day in Bumfuck Springs went?"

"You interrupted me for that?"

"Well I didn't know I was interrupting, did I? So how'd it go?"

"Pretty good. I met Danetta and Jaxon,"

"Hm, *Jaxon*, huh? I can tell by the way you said his name that he's already made quite an impression on you. He's hot then?"

"*That's* an understatement," Kieran admitted. "But he's definitely sickeningly in love with Danetta. And he's not worried about Saturday—he's convinced she's gonna go through with the whole thing. Danetta acted pretty certain of it, too. Maybe she *is* pregnant," he joked. "Did you ever ask her about that?"

"I sort of hinted around at it. She clammed up, said it wasn't any of my business, and then said that if I really wanted to know, then no, she wasn't pregnant. She got pretty annoyed at me even though I tried to say it as a joke. So what'd you did find out?"

Kieran briefly described his day, his talks with Tom and Jordan, and the disastrous dinner.

"Oh, Danetta's parents are really something, aren't they?" Alexa remarked. "I remember them from the two weddings I went to. Her mom is fucking scary, and her father is like the perfect servant—always there, but never really seen or heard."

"That's a great description," Kieran agreed. "They really would make anyone think ten, twenty times before getting married. Why didn't you warn me about them?"

"Now that would have ruined all the fun of you meeting them yourself, wouldn't it?" she said breezily.

"Bitch!" Kieran replied with a laugh. "Oh, look, I need to get going, I'm meeting Jaxon for lunch, and then I'm

spending the afternoon at school with him." Kieran said, noticing the time, nearly 10 am.

"Is that a date?" Alexa teased.

"Only in my mind," Kieran admitted with a self-deprecating laugh. "Talk to you later, okay? I might have a few things I'd like you to look up for me. Can you do it?"

"Sure, just give me a buzz. Enjoy your date!"

"Hey, Lex?"

"Yeah?"

"What're you wearing?" Kieran asked in a deep sexy voice.

"Fuck off!" Alexa said, and hung up.

* * * *

Kieran hopped in the shower and was dressed and ready to go by 10:30. It was only a five-minute walk to the restaurant, so he spent some time going over his notes from the previous day and jotting down a list of topics he wanted to cover at school with Jaxon.

When Kieran walked into Tumbleweeds a couple of minutes past 11 a.m., Jaxon was already there waiting. *Very punctual*, Kieran thought. He wondered if it might mean Jaxon was looking forward to spending time with him.

"Morning," Jaxon said as Kieran sat down.

"Hey," Kieran replied, but didn't get any farther because a waitress was hovering with a menu. She had shoulder-length brown hair, and a nametag: "Howdy, I'm Erica!" *Probably not from around here*, Kieran thought, *otherwise her name would be spelled E-R-I-K-U-H or something equally as ridiculous.*

Oblivious to his thoughts, she smiled and handed Kieran the menu.

As the waitress walked away, Kieran noticed she wore a very short cowgirl skirt and boots. He looked at the menu. Every item had a ridiculous Wild West-inspired name. He tried not to roll his eyes at the overwhelming cuteness.

"Despite the décor and theme," Jaxon said, "the food is good here." Only then did Kieran notice the table was made from a wagon wheel. *Christ!*

"Can I get a turkey club?" Kieran asked when Erica came by again. "I can't figure out what you call it here, sorry."

"Oh, that's the Rustler, and it comes with fries or cole slaw," she said and smiled.

"Can I possibly get both?" Kieran asked, flashing his dimples.

"Absolutely!" she replied cheerfully, obviously swayed by Kieran's charm and the power of his dimples. "Something to drink?"

"Iced tea, please," Kieran replied, and looked over at Jaxon.

"I've already ordered," he replied.

Erica quickly returned with two iced teas and swept off to another table, hips swinging and skirt flaring. Just about every man in there excepting Kieran—and *Jaxon*, he noticed—had his eyes glued to Erica. Kieran glanced around at the décor: cow horns, stuffed armadillos, cowboy hats, boots, and even part of an old covered wagon. He also took a minute to check out the other customers. The place was nearly packed.

Most people smiled when Kieran caught their eye, but a few gave him a look that made him very uncomfortable.

"Jaxon," Kieran said in a quiet voice. Jaxon had to lean in to hear him. "Did you tell anyone what I told you last night? About me?"

"About being gay?" Jaxon whispered back, only mouthing the last word. He'd picked up on the looks Kieran was getting, too.

"Yeah."

"No. Well, I told Danny, but I didn't think that would matter. But no one else, and I don't think she would say anything. Why would she?" That was clearly meant as a rhetorical question. "Maybe someone overheard us in the saloon?"

"Maybe, but I didn't think anyone was nearby."

"Are you worried if people find out?"

"A little," Kieran said. "This is Texas, after all." He wasn't sure how he'd be treated in the small town, but figured it might be enough to deter some people from talking to him. And there was always the threat of physical harm from people who didn't think his life was worth much. "Should I be?" he asked Jaxon.

"Well, I don't know of anyone in town who's gay, so I don't really have a good feel for how people will take it."

"What did Danetta say when you told her?"

"Nothing. She's lived away from here, so she's open-minded. She was mainly interested in what we talked about last night, so I just summed up our conversation. I left out

that we talked about her parents, though," Jaxon said with a laugh.

Erica came by with the food. Jaxon and Kieran ate in silence. Kieran thought about what he'd asked Jaxon the night before. He'd tried a few ways to wheedle out that mysterious and maddeningly secret bond Jaxon mentioned; but he didn't think Jaxon picked up on it enough to let Danetta know.

They stuck to small talk for the rest of the meal, which Kieran finished off with a large piece of warm homemade peach pie topped with two scoops of vanilla ice cream—after he'd again eaten the rest of Jaxon's fries. When Kieran asked for the bill, the waitress told him it was on the house.

* * * *

Kieran spent the afternoon in Jaxon's office, watching him go about his work, which consisted of speaking with teachers and students, and one conference with the parents of a suspended student who faced possible expulsion. Kieran sat quietly near the corner, and Jaxon made sure no one minded Kieran sitting in on their meetings. No one had. Kieran was impressed with the way the staff respected Jaxon, even though he was much younger than many of the teachers. The students also seemed to listen to Jaxon and long for his approval, including a sophomore brought in for fighting during his lunch break. Jaxon gave the impression that he listened to and considered everything people said to him. People in turn clearly trusted him. Kieran didn't doubt Jaxon's sincerity or

the concern he had for the students and staff in the school, and could see why Jaxon had been so successful in his career.

Between meetings, Kieran and Jaxon chatted. Kieran casually brought up the topics he wanted to cover.

"So, when is the end of the school year?"

"Two more weeks of school, then one or two weeks of administrative wrap-up work before I get my summer break."

"You're taking a honeymoon next month then?"

"Next week, actually," Jaxon replied. "It's exam week. They don't really need me around for that. I'll be back for graduation, and then the admin work I mentioned."

"Where are you going?"

"Hawaii—Kauai, to be exact. It should be beautiful," Jaxon said, clearly looking forward to the trip.

"It is. I've been once before," Kieran said.

"You'll have to tell me the best things are to do and see while we're there."

"Let me think on it and see what I remember," Kieran told him. "It was a few years ago." He wondered why Jaxon needed to find activities to do on his honeymoon. "So, what are you planning for the summer break, then?"

"Danny is attending some seminar in Savannah, so we'll go there for a couple of weeks; then maybe visit some other historical southern towns. We haven't planned much else out yet. The wedding's been the priority so far."

"Sure," Kieran said. "You seem to have taken a pretty active role in helping Danetta with that, from what she was saying."

"Are you kidding?" Jaxon asked with a laugh. "She doesn't want or need my help. She's been through this three times before, so she knows what she wants and how to do it. I'd just be in the way. I honestly don't care one way or the other about any of it," he added, and Kieran added back a few respect points. "But she wants to make me feel like I'm involved." Jaxon said that as if it were the sweetest thing ever. *He's going Stepford again*, Kieran thought with disappointment as he mentally deducted points from Jaxon's respect score again.

The office phone rang. It was Danetta, calling to say she'd been able to schedule some time for Kieran to meet Mike, groom number three; and that she'd be by to pick Kieran up in 10 minutes. As much as Kieran wanted to meet Mike, he was disappointed he wouldn't get to spend the rest of the afternoon with Jaxon.

Jaxon must have read his thoughts. "Kieran, would you want to meet up later on at Sam's?" he asked while walking Kieran to the front of the school. "How about 8 o'clock?"

"Yeah, sounds good," Kieran said just as Danetta drove up in her car.

* * * *

Mike Rossiter was a lawyer and the Assistant DA for the county. His office was in the famous courthouse Kieran read about online during his preliminary research. Though he'd passed by it a dozen times by then, Kieran hadn't yet been inside.

Danetta gave a running commentary on the historical accuracy of the furnishings and fixtures in the building, all the way down to the paint. *She seems to really enjoy her job*, Kieran thought, as he ignored the details of nearly everything she said on the topic. He realized that he couldn't continue allowing her to plan all his appointments for him. He needed to be in control and not let her manipulate the impression he formed of her and her former beaus. *This is the last thing I let her arrange*, he resolved as he found himself at the door of Mike's office.

Danetta knocked once before throwing the door open. Mike came around from behind his desk to greet them, offering a handshake to Kieran. After a quick introduction, Danetta left. Kieran noticed that same strange look on Mike's face as he watched her leave.

"Danetta's really something, isn't she?" Mike asked. He was in his late 20's, dark-haired and fair-skinned, somewhat of a type with Danetta in general; and about six feet tall. He wore an expensive, well-tailored suit, more than a notch above the professional attire Kieran had seen so far in the courthouse.

"Oh, yeah. She's something," Kieran agreed, though he hadn't figured out what yet.

Mike's story was a lot like Jordan's, only he'd been a prosecutor in Dallas and moved to Buckwheat Springs to continue his relationship with Danetta. There were always jobs for lawyers, even in small towns. But her job was unique, and he wouldn't dream of taking her away from it. Moving to a town like this after Dallas had taken some major lifestyle

adjustments for him, especially being away from his family, with whom he was particularly close; but Danetta had been worth it. Mike was also just as thrilled as Tom and Jordan had been about Danetta marrying Jaxon. Kieran began to wonder if Danetta had passed out scripts in preparation for his interviews.

Before leaving, Kieran asked Mike who Danetta's closest girlfriends were. Kieran hadn't spoken with any of them, and Danetta hadn't offered to introduce him to any. He knew he had to talk to them if he wanted to get to know Danetta any better.

* * * *

Kieran walked back to his motel and asked Mrs. Connors at the front desk for a phone book. When she realized he wanted to call Danetta's friends, she simply told Kieran where they all worked and suggested he'd have better luck just dropping in. Armed with his list of friends, Kieran dutifully headed for the closest one; a girl who worked in a vintage clothing store along Main Street. He went in and asked for Kristin, who turned out to be a slim, petite girl with beautiful almond-shaped brown eyes and sleek dark brown hair falling in glossy waves over her shoulders.

Kristin had been friends with Danetta since childhood and was more than happy to talk about the weddings and the grooms. Kieran got an idea.

"Kristin, how about if I take you and Danetta's other bridesmaids out for dinner tonight? I know it's kind of short notice, but—"

"Oh, that would be fun!" she cried eagerly. "Let me call a few of the girls and arrange it. I'm sure they'd all be happy to change whatever plans they had for a chance to talk to you! Now where did you want to go?"

"You decide. I don't care; just pick your favorite place."

"Well, La Piñata has like twenty different flavors of margaritas," Kristin said excitedly. "Would that be okay?"

"Sounds fantastic!" Kieran told her, mirroring her excitement, happy to provide as many margaritas as the job required. At this point, he could use one himself.

* * * *

By six p.m. Kieran was at La Piñata with five of Danetta's best friends—her bridesmaids—and a rainbow of margaritas arrayed in front of them. Erica, the Tumbleweeds waitress, was among the group. The girls happily sipped and chattered. Kieran flirted shamelessly with them and kept ordering margaritas, food, anything they wanted. They were all thrilled about the wedding and being bridesmaids, again, even though this was the fourth time each had to buy a dress to match the latest wedding's color scheme. During the next two hours, Kieran brazenly asked as many questions as he could think of to get an idea of what Danetta was really like and what her secret was.

"We don't have a clue," a bubbly redhead called Chloe said. "We'd love to know how Danetta can get all of these hot guys to fall in love with her and want to marry her. She just has some natural charm or something. I mean, she goes on

these trips for work and like, within a few months, a new boyfriend decides to move to town."

"Yeah, and then a month or two later, she's got another ring on her finger," Kristin added. "Well, you know, not all the rings at once. Like, a different new one," she clarified, slightly slurring her words. She'd worked her way through about half the rainbow by now, Kieran suspected. He hoped he'd get something sufficiently juicy to justify the bar tab they were running up.

"She got some sort of formula for catching a guy in six months or less, it seems," a serious-looking blonde girl called Dinah said as she sipped at something alarmingly blue. "She really needs to share the secret with us," she added with more than a touch of envy.

"But Jaxon, wow, he's really the best of all," Dinah added dreamily. The others agreed loudly and went on to list all of Jaxon's charms, most of which Kieran had already discovered or suspected. The idea of Danetta having a six-month formula stuck in his head and Kieran jotted down a few notes on points to follow up with in his research.

Just before 8 p.m., Kieran said he needed to get going, and thanked everyone for coming to dinner. He'd gotten as much information as he was going to get tonight, and had gotten the girls to trust him. Next time he spoke with any of them, it was likely she'd let down her guard and he'd be able to extract something really useful. Kieran wished he'd thought to leave earlier, eager to meet Jaxon. It took him another 15 minutes to extricate himself from their grateful hugs and

goodbyes and pay the bill, and was late getting to Sam's. As expected, Jaxon was already there, working on his first beer.

"Sorry I'm late," Kieran apologized. "I got stuck at dinner." He sat down next to Jaxon at a table near the back of the place, slightly farther back than they sat the previous night. They were both facing the bar and Kieran could get an idea of who might be listening to their conversation, as well as watch the other patrons. He felt safer that way.

Sam came by and took Kieran's order, returning a few minutes later with a beer. He noticed that Jaxon's hair was a bit damp and wondered if he'd had taken a shower just for him. *Okay, that's ridiculous*, Kieran chided himself. More likely, Jaxon had just fucked Danetta and *that* was why he'd taken the shower.

"What'd you do for dinner?" Jaxon asked. Apparently word hadn't traveled around town yet, much to Kieran's surprise.

"I took the bridesmaids out for dinner and twenty different flavors of margaritas," Kieran answered. "Not necessarily in that order," he added and Jaxon laughed.

"La Piñata," he said. That explains it."

"Explains what?" Kieran asked.

"Your perfume. Unless you were wearing it for me," Jaxon joked.

Kieran realized that with all the hugging he definitely smelled of bridesmaid—or at least their perfume but at least he had a good excuse for that.

Sam came up to their table with a tray and put a plate in front of Jaxon: a grilled chicken sandwich and curly fries.

"I went to the gym after school and didn't get a chance to eat yet," Jaxon explained as he bit into the sandwich. "I gotta lay off the cheeseburgers," he added, patting his stomach.

From what Kieran could see—and he had definitely looked—Jaxon was in good shape with a firm, flat stomach. Tonight he wore a button-down shirt fitted in such a way as to give a clear impression of his well-built upper body. Not that Kieran was really looking now. Much.

"What about the fries?" Kieran asked, hoping it wasn't completely obvious that he was staring at Jaxon's body, relieved to know Jaxon hadn't been with Danetta before they met up here.

"Oh, those are for you," Jaxon replied with a smile and rotated his plate so the fries were within easy reach for Kieran.

Jesus, Kieran thought. This was too much. *What is Jaxon playing at here?* he wondered. There was something there in Jaxon's smile and his continued interest in making plans with Kieran.

They chatted about nothing in particular, not once touching on the subjects of Danetta, the wedding, or anything to do with why Kieran was even in Buckwheat Springs. After a couple of beers, Kieran suggested they switch to tequila. He ordered a round of shots of the best tequila Sam had behind the bar, and a couple more of a middle-quality tequila. They knocked back the cheaper shots quickly, then sipped at the smooth añejo while they talked.

"It must be hard settling down here in a small town after Dallas and Austin," Kieran started. He still couldn't fathom

why Jaxon would have even considered moving here in the first place, especially when he'd only been seeing Danetta for a few months at the time.

"Yeah, it's taken some getting used to," Jaxon agreed. "The school practically runs itself. There's not much of a challenge for me professionally. Maybe I'll run for city council or something, just to make things more interesting."

"Why don't you just move somewhere else?" Kieran suggested.

"Danetta's job is here, and she really loves it. I don't think she could find something similar anywhere else. I wouldn't want to make her leave just for my career," Jaxon said. Kieran wondered why Jaxon was so willing to make such personal and professional sacrifices for the woman. There were plenty of historical towns around the country that she could consider, many of them near larger metropolitan areas where Jaxon would easily be able to find an appropriate school administrator position. He could even look into teaching at a college or university. It was unconscionable that Danetta let him lock himself away in this tiny town, no matter how cute the place was or how happy she was here.

As little interest as Kieran had in Danetta, and he fully admitted that to himself, he couldn't help but wonder what else was behind Jaxon's apparent lack of motivation regarding his own career. "That's the whole reason? That *Danetta's* happy here?" Kieran probed.

"That's enough for me," Jaxon replied, defiance edging into his voice. "I'd do anything to make her happy. And if she wants to stay in town, I'm prepared to give up a few things to

make that happen. I owe her..." His voice trailed off, and Kieran held his tongue. He desperately wanted to know what Jaxon felt he owed Danetta.

"How about another round of tequila?" Kieran offered, looking for a way to keep Jaxon here longer and loosen his tongue.

"I don't drink tequila much anymore," Jaxon said. "Not since college, really." Kieran could see the alcohol was beginning to affect him. Undoubtedly, Danetta didn't let Jaxon go out drinking with his pals very often. She probably only let him come out now so as to give Kieran a good impression of herself.

"Well, we should try a few different brands. You can figure out which one you like best."

"I'm not sure I could handle a few more."

"Next time," Kieran said.

"Okay. Next time," Jaxon agreed, sounding as if he thought there *would* be a next time. Kieran tried not to get too excited about the prospect. He had to keep reminding himself Jaxon was getting married in a few days.

"So, Kierrrran, can I ask you something personal?" Jaxon asked, not quite slurring his words.

"Yeah?"

"You never, ya know, with a girl?" His voice was quiet; Kieran had to lean in to hear it.

"I didn't say that."

"You must not have liked it much, didya?"

"I didn't say that, either."

"Well?"

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

"I liked it." *Oh God*, Kieran thought. He was way too close to those freckles and Jaxon's clean, fresh scent to start talking about sex now. He wasn't sure he could handle it. He tried not to watch Jaxon's mouth as he spoke, but Kieran didn't have that much self control. He didn't really have any lately, it seemed.

"So *why*, then, dude?"

"I guess I like it better with guys. I'm more drawn to them. But at the basic level, sex is sex. As long as you're attracted to someone and they're doing the right things, it's going to feel great, right?"

"Well, I think there's more to it than that."

"Are you asking me about sex or about love? There's a difference."

"Yeah, there *is* a difference. A big difference," Jaxon said. "I guess sometimes you can confuse them, huh?"

"Are you still talking about me, now?" Kieran asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Jaxon was quiet for a few minutes. "Did you ever love a woman?"

"No."

"Ah, so is that why you tried guys?"

"I wouldn't say it's exactly like I 'tried guys.' I just never really thought about choosing men or women. I kind of just noticed who attracted me as an individual person, regardless of their gender. Some happened to be guys and some happened to be women. Now it's pretty much exclusively men."

"But that's about sex again, right? I'm asking about love this time."

"Well, I haven't been in love with a woman before."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Okay, now who's interviewing whom?"

"You can't call this an interview, not when you buy me tequila. That's got to be against some sort of journalistic code of ethics."

"There is no journalistic code of ethics when it comes to alcohol," Kieran said laughing. "But I suddenly feel that the tables have been turned here. No one's ever asked me this many questions before."

"Ha, now you're on the other end of the question, it seems really nosy and personal, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does."

"Well, I'm not writin' an article. Just askin' outta *personal* curiosity. Okay?" Jaxon asked. Kieran nodded. "Just friends talkin'"

That snapped Kieran back into reality.

Friends? Kieran asked himself. They weren't *friends*. He was here to do a job, and part of that was supposed to be making Jaxon look like a fool for falling for Danetta. Jaxon wouldn't really need much help looking ridiculous if Danetta ran, but the more people he spoke to, the more Kieran was beginning to believe that this time she wouldn't.

Danetta seemed too concerned about appearances—hence the little show she'd put on for him at dinner the night before—to cooperate with Kieran and introduce him to her exes, only to bail out in the middle of yet another wedding,

knowing it would be in a national magazine. At this moment, Kieran was nearly positive that Danetta was planning to stick around and actually marry Jaxon. What he still needed to find out was whether in the past she'd had doubts in advance, or whether she truly changed her mind at the absolute last minute. To make matters worse, the idea of Jaxon spending the rest of his life with Danetta was becoming harder and harder for Kieran to accept. He suddenly realized it wouldn't be as easy to write this column as he'd thought.

Kieran knew he had to step back from Jaxon, literally and figuratively. He was getting way too attracted to him for this to turn out well for anyone; and Kieran wasn't about to risk his job for the chance to spend one or two nights with a guy who would definitely be married by Saturday. There would be no way Kieran could write the column he needed if he got too emotionally invested in these people—especially Jaxon. He'd learned that much from the last column, and he hadn't even wanted to sleep with any of his interview subjects.

Kieran glanced around the room, needing to look at anything but Jaxon sitting so close to him, smelling so good, and taking such a close personal interest in him. He noticed a couple of guys watching—but without the disapproving, potentially dangerous kind of look he saw earlier.

"Hey," Kieran said quietly to Jaxon, "I thought you said no one in this town is gay."

"They're not, as far as I know."

"Well, a couple of them are giving me ... looks," Kieran replied.

"Like they want to beat you up?"

"No, just the opposite. Like they're interested, cruising me," Kieran said, noticing one guy in particular, nice-looking, about Kieran's age and slim with sandy-blond hair and mesmerizing cornflower-blue eyes. It was a guy he'd met in the coffee shop the day before, but Kieran couldn't remember his name. The look was unmistakable, and Kieran thought maybe his visit here might be more interesting than he'd expected. He welcomed the opportunity to focus his sexual energy on someone else and stop fantasizing about Jaxon. Or at least not fantasize as much.

"Really?" Jaxon seemed surprised, but didn't say anything else.

"Well maybe I'm reading too much into it," Kieran said. But the look turned into more of an *invitation*. "Hang on a minute." Kieran got up from the table and headed toward the bathroom.

* * * *

When he came back he was worried that Jaxon might have left, but he was still at their table, working on a fresh beer. There was another beer in front of Kieran's place, too.

"Hey, thought you fell in or something," Jaxon said when Kieran sat down again. "You should probably eat more fiber."

"I eat plenty of fiber," Kieran said laughing. "That's not what I was doing."

Jaxon didn't say anything for a moment. Then understanding dawned in his eyes.

"You just *fucked* some guy in the bathroom?" he asked, in a stunned whisper.

"No."

"Some guy fucked *you*?"

"No. Uh, blow job." Jaxon had been asking so many questions about Kieran's sex life, so Kieran figured he'd offer some details.

"No fucking way! Who?"

"I can't tell you. That would out the person, and that's not how we do things."

Jaxon looked around at the people in the bar, trying to figure out who it was.

"Hey, don't do that," Kieran reprimanded. "It's not fair. How do you think he'd feel if everyone knew?" The last thing he wanted was for the guy he'd been with—Spencer—to find out he'd said anything to Jaxon.

"You can just do that with a complete *stranger*?" Jaxon asked, still curious, but with a definite note of disapproval in his voice.

"Yeah," Kieran said, though he guessed Jaxon really didn't want to hear that.

"How can you separate sex out like that, so it's totally removed from having any feelings about a person?"

"Sometimes that's all you want, or maybe there isn't anyone around that you have feelings for, so you just go for someone you're physically attracted to. Sometimes, there *is* someone you'd like to have a relationship with, but they're not available, and you have to make do with someone else."

"So which reason is it now?" Jaxon asked.

"Any of them. All of them."

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

"You've asked me a lot of very personal questions over the last two days," Jaxon reminded him. "Can't I have a few of my own?"

"Fine," Kieran said. "The last reason. There's someone that I can't have, and I'm trying to distract myself. And yes, I think that while sex is sex, it can be better with someone you love. It can also be worse. It's just different. It doesn't matter as much whether the sex is good or bad, it's going to be special every single time if you really love that person. Or it should be." Kieran exhaled loudly through his nose, suddenly feeling embarrassed and vulnerable and wondering what Jaxon would make of what he'd just said.

Jaxon broke their stare. He looked down and pulled at the label on the beer bottle, dropping the shreds in a little pile in front of him. His expression was thoughtful.

"It's pretty late, and I need to get home. Drinks are on me," Jaxon said. He got up and walked away.

What the hell am I doing? Kieran panicked. *What the hell am I going to do tomorrow?* He couldn't believe how much Jaxon had affected him after only two days. Kieran got up and went up to sit on a stool at the bar. He ordered enough tequila shots to keep his mind from thinking straight, lined them up on the bar, and gulped down the first one.

"You see it, too, doncha?" Sam asked as she watched him down the first shot.

"See what?"

"That Jaxon doesn't belong with Danetta."

"Something like that," Kieran responded.

"She's got her poison into him somehow," Sam said cryptically. "And she'll break him and win. I don't want to see it happen, either."

"What kind of poison is it?" Kieran wondered out loud.

"Hell if I know. But I can see your mind's working on the problem," she said, walking away to serve another customer.

Kieran knocked back the next shot, grateful for the harsh burn that scorched his throat as he swallowed. He picked up the next one immediately. As he raised the glass to his lips, Kieran got a flash of insight; a tiny germ of an idea. He knew someone had said something to him today that would help him figure it out, but his brain hadn't fully processed the information yet. He decided not to drink the rest of the tequila after all. Kieran slapped the shot glass back down onto the surface of the bar where it sloshed and spilled. He left more than enough money to cover the drinks plus a big tip for Sam, waving to her as he ran out the door.

Back in his room, Kieran got ready for bed and under the covers. He was asleep before he could even turn off the light.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

Wednesday

Kieran waked face-down on the pillow. He thought he felt a feather in his mouth. He tried to blow it out, but even afterwards his mouth felt as though there'd been a whole duck in there, and not the kind with plum sauce. He had a headache: the aftereffect of beer and tequila from the night before. He swallowed a few Tylenol, grimacing at the bitterness, and then brushed his teeth in the shower to get out the combined flavors of tequila, feathers and medicine. His strange conversation with Jaxon came back, and Kieran wished he knew what Jaxon had been thinking when he'd walked out of Sam's the night before.

After his shower, Kieran walked to the Copper Caboose for breakfast. This time he had one order of pecan pancakes and one of the daily special—today it was apple pancakes—along with bacon, fruit salad, and lots of hot black coffee. By the time he'd guzzled his first cup, his head had stopped threatening to explode. He noticed that this morning Natalee didn't shake her own caboose at him. *Everyone in town must know I'm gay by now*, he figured. Thankfully they were still as friendly toward him as before.

"That's a really good color on you," Natalee said as she filled Kieran's mug with coffee for at least the third time. "Do you think it would look good on me?" He was wearing a salmon-colored button-down shirt, which actually did look good on him. *Fuck*, he thought, *I'm not the queer eye for*

fucking fashion! He wondered glumly if she'd ask him some hairstyling tips as well. Being stereotyped bored him.

He left the restaurant sooner than he'd have liked because Natalee was making him nervous. He needed to clear his head. Kieran decided it was a good opportunity to take his rented convertible out for a nice, relaxing drive. The sun shining on his face and the fresh air would do him a world of good. He missed driving, and the long straight roads in this part of Texas were just what he needed.

* * * *

Back at the hotel, Kieran went to work on his column. He knew he needed to get as much as possible written before he saw Jaxon again. *If* he saw Jaxon again. Kieran needed to make Jaxon and the other grooms look ridiculous for falling for Danetta, and it was getting nearly impossible for Kieran to act detached. He decided to go with his first impressions; and then later on, if he found out Danetta's secret, he could work it in.

When he got hungry, Kieran called Sam and asked if she'd deliver a food order for him. Kieran wanted to avoid any chance of running into Jaxon on the street or at Sam's. The way he'd left Sam's almost abruptly the night before made Kieran think he'd scared Jaxon off by letting on that he'd been attracted to him. Kieran called Sam back and asked her to include a bottle of tequila with his food order; he expected he was probably going to need it to get to sleep tonight.

After he'd eaten, Kieran focused his full attention on work. He was fairly pleased with what he'd written so far, and his

initial impressions Danetta, Jaxon, and the three ex-grooms. He'd managed to get the right level of sarcasm and condescension that his readers loved. Jeff was going to eat this up. Danetta came across as an amalgam of witch and Svengali, and Kieran painted the grooms as having fallen under her spell. Based on Kieran's dinner with Jaxon and Danetta, she certainly seemed to be pulling Jaxon's strings.

It was going to be hard to account for the fact that Tom, Jordan and Mike seemed to like Jaxon. Kieran had been hoping to see some evidence of *schadenfreude*; that they were going to be happy to see Jaxon crash and burn the way they had. But if any of them actually felt that way, Kieran couldn't detect it. He rationalized that the three of them had some hidden information they were keeping from Jaxon. Outwardly they were nice to him, but in reality, they knew way more than he did and apparently weren't sharing the intel. Kieran chalked that up to Danetta's continued influence over the three men and played that up.

At first, it had been hard to mock Jaxon sufficiently in writing after they'd struck up some level of friendship. But knowing that Jaxon seemed at first like Danetta's puppet made it somewhat easier. Kieran went mainly with his first impressions. Those had been so negative that it hadn't taken much effort once Kieran got writing.

Kieran poured his first glass of tequila and read over what he'd written. He made a few changes and e-mailed the document to Jeff. It was exactly what Jeff had been looking for: cutting, sarcastic, condescending and very, very critical of just about everyone and everything he'd seen in

Buckwheat Springs. He felt a twinge of guilt over what he'd written as he considered how kind everyone was to him; but he'd come to do a job, and he was going to do it well.

It was a good thing he scared Jaxon off the night before, Kieran decided, pouring his second glass of tequila. Making emotional attachments here could only lead to disaster, especially in the case of Jaxon. There was no chance in hell of there being anything between them, so it was best to just try and act as if it had never happened. Kieran could write his column, ridicule everyone, and return to familiar professional and emotional territory in New York.

All he had to do now was to stay friendly enough with Jaxon to attend the rehearsal dinner, hopefully the bachelor party, and then the wedding. Kieran could put on a façade for a few days and keep his attraction to Jaxon hidden. On Saturday, or more likely Sunday—no, he'd probably have a Texas-sized hangover then for after getting as drunk as possible if the wedding went as planned—or Monday, he'd write the second part of the column, telling exactly how the wedding went and then do some follow-up interviews with people in town to get their impressions.

A knock sounded on Kieran's motel room door, surprising him out of his thoughts. He had no idea who would be coming by, so he was more than shocked when he opened it to find Jaxon standing there. Wordlessly, Jaxon came in, closing the door behind him. Kieran blinked, thinking he'd found himself back in the dream from the previous morning. Surreptitiously, Kieran pinched himself. He blinked a few more times. Jaxon was still there.

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

"I needed to see you," Jaxon began, "talk to you." He paused for a long moment. He walked over and sat on the couch, as if looking for an excuse to avoid continuing. "I spent a lot of time today thinking. A lot. You made me realize, or remember, so many things I forgot since I came here."

Kieran sat down on the couch with him. "I'm not sure what you're saying, Jaxon."

"Gonna offer me a drink?" Jaxon asked nervously, noticing the bottle of tequila on the table where Kieran had been working.

Kieran found a clean glass and poured a drink for Jaxon, who downed it in one gulp. "If you need a drink to say what you want to say, what does that tell me?" He sat back down on the couch with Jaxon and put the bottle down on a low table in front of the couch.

"It should tell you that I'm going to say something important, or I wouldn't be so anxious."

"Fair enough," Kieran said, regretting having said anything in the first place. Of course it was going to be difficult for Jaxon to say whatever he'd come here to say. It certainly wasn't about the wedding colors or seating charts for the reception. It was going to be about Kieran.

"Can I ask you something about last night?" Jaxon asked. "About the guy you, uh, fooled around with?"

"I'm tired of answering your questions about my sex life. If you're that curious, there's a better way to find out." It was part challenge, part invitation.

"I know I keep asking a lot of questions, but I'm just curious. About things. About *you*," Jaxon admitted, looking down at his hands.

"You are? Why?"

"Part of it is that I think we have a lot in common. We've both moved away from home: far away, not necessarily in physical distance, but in lifestyle. You went to a much bigger city, while I came to a little town. That's almost the same thing. It's a big transition, figuring out where you fit into a place where things are unfamiliar, and life happens at a totally different pace. Slowing down is just as hard to get used to as speeding up."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Kieran admitted. *And here I'm supposed to be the writer, the one with the special perspective.*

"I can tell that in New York, you feel like there's a path for you; but you can't find yours because there are so many paths, all different and twisting around each other. And for me here, it's as if there is a path, just one, and I'm on it; and there's nothing else but that one path. And it feels like that path was waiting for me here, before I ever arrived. I'm just blindly following it, taking the same steps many people before me took."

"You mean marrying Danetta?" Kieran asked.

"Yes," Jaxon replied with regret heavy in his voice. "Three other guys went down that path before me. For them, the path disappeared before they got to the end. But they were still on the very same path."

"I thought you love her," Kieran offered. He was bored with the path metaphor, but let Jaxon continue. Hell, he had Jaxon here in his hotel room. The guy could sing Tom Jones songs if he wanted to.

"I do love her. I want to marry her, but I also have this feeling that there are a lot of things I missed out on because I got on the path too soon. I think it's the right path, but I think I need to see what else there is before I get to the end. I want to step off the path," Jaxon said. "With you."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Kieran asked.

"It's just one step, and I can get back on again."

"Can you? Do you think you can just pretend nothing happened here?"

"Why not? You said yourself that it's possible, even preferable in some cases, to separate sex from love."

"Jaxon, it's fine that you've decided that. But what about me? Since I met you, those two things are blending together. You can't just come here like this without any thought to how it might affect me. I'm not sure I would want you to get back on that path again."

"But you didn't think twice about what you did last night, did you?" Jaxon asked.

"No, but with him it was just sex. With you, well, there's a lot more," Kieran said softly. He wanted Jaxon, that was certain; but he didn't want to be with him under these circumstances. Letting Jaxon go back to Danetta would be torture after they'd been together.

"Let's see," Jaxon said, and moved closer to Kieran on the couch.

Kieran felt his body respond. The spark of excitement battled against his common sense, which shouted at him that he would regret whatever he was about to do.

Jaxon leaned in toward Kieran, eyes locked on his, and brushed his full, soft lips gently against Kieran's mouth. Then he leaned back slightly, meeting Kieran's gaze again before pressing his mouth firmly to Kieran's and letting his lips explore. The feel of Jaxon's lips was electric. Kieran let himself be kissed, let Jaxon give or take whatever he wanted. Jaxon brought his right hand up to caress Kieran's cheek, fingers lingering almost lovingly on the tiny mole near his chin before moving to rub through the bristly hair of Kieran's sideburns. Kieran recalled the dream he'd had the day before. *It's actually happening*, Kieran thought with joy, *almost exactly as it had in the dream*. He didn't let himself think about whether it was right or wrong, just how good it was.

Kieran parted his mouth, inviting Jaxon in, and was rewarded by Jaxon's tongue playing slowly along Kieran's lips, licking at them with more and more heat, before finally darting inside. There was nothing gentle about it now, and Jaxon's mouth plundered Kieran's, devouring it with such intensity and passion that it took Kieran by surprise. He felt off balance, as if the world were spinning, moving at warp speed, with light and sound and amazing sensations that only began where Jaxon's mouth touched his and sang through Kieran's entire body. It was the very definition of mind-blowing.

Matching Jaxon's intensity, Kieran returned the ardor, his arms circling Jaxon and pulling him in closer. Kieran forgot

how to think, how to breathe, how to do anything but kiss and be kissed until Jaxon pulled his mouth off of Kieran's and suddenly the world was still again, no longer bright and shining and spinning. They were back on the couch in Kieran's motel room, in each other's arms.

"No one's ever kissed me like that before," Kieran gasped when he was finally able to form words. His chest was heaving from lack of oxygen, and his brain wasn't fully functioning yet.

"I've never felt anything like that, either. Never wanted a kiss as much as that," Jaxon said, clearly moved by the experience, breath shallow and raspy.

"I take it that met your expectations?" Kieran asked with a slight smirk.

"Far exceeded anything I'd imagined," Jaxon replied.

Kieran pressed his mouth to Jaxon's again, thrilled when the other man parted his lips. Kieran explored the lips and mouth he'd been dreaming about for days, at first gently with fingertips, then with his own lips and tongue, licking and sucking at them, wanting to memorize everything about the way they tasted and felt so he could remember them forever. He drank in the sweetness and heat of Jaxon's mouth, their tongues dancing and darting, giving and taking, until he had to stop and breathe again.

Kieran looked into Jaxon's eyes, glittering darkly with arousal and more emotion than Kieran expected to see in them. Kieran was so hard it hurt; and his erection was as obvious as the bulge in Jaxon's jeans. Their attraction was mutual.

"How far off the path did you want to go?" Kieran whispered.

Jaxon was silent. Kieran watched him think, letting his eyes play over Jaxon's face. He took in the sprinkling of freckles on his cheeks; the beautiful lips, now shiny-wet and bruised from their combined passion; the end-of-day-stubble looking almost golden in the lamplight. Kieran caressed Jaxon's chin, trailing his fingers down Jaxon's throat, feeling Jaxon's entire body shudder at the touch and pleasure it obviously gave him.

Jaxon's head went back, exposing his neck and throat, and Kieran leaned in to kiss and lick at him, making Jaxon groan loudly. Kieran unbuttoned the first button on Jaxon's shirt. He peeled back the fabric and stroked Jaxon's chest lightly. Jaxon sighed, moving into the touch. One more button. Kieran's fingertips played softly at one of Jaxon's nipples, which peaked at the touch. Jaxon closed his eyes and moaned as Kieran gently pulled at the nipple before closing his mouth over it.

Kieran's hand traveled down towards Jaxon's lap, brushing gently over his erection. Jaxon's body nearly leapt off the couch in response, and his eyes shot open. Kieran felt Jaxon's hands pushing him back.

"Stop," Jaxon said, barely even a whisper. Kieran sat back up and waited. "This—you—oh God, it's so good," Jaxon began, his breath coming in gasps. "It's too good. It's like a drug. If you ... we ... I won't be able to give it up. And I'm afraid won't be able to be happy without you. I can't go any

farther than this." Jaxon looked down toward the floor as he spoke, his voice heavy with regret and emotion.

"Okay," Kieran said, but the disappointment was obvious. "Just kissing?"

"No. I won't want to stop at kissing."

"I understand," Kieran said dejectedly. He understood, but it didn't mean he was happy about. "I'm sorry if I pushed you."

"You didn't push. I'm the one who came here wanting you. I'm sorry I can't give you more, but..." Jaxon paused. "You're right. It's not just about sex for me, either."

Kieran couldn't believe Jaxon had just admitted he had feelings for him; that this wasn't just about experimenting. There was something deeper there that they both felt.

"Maybe it's for the best," Kieran replied with extreme disappointment. "Like I said, I would have a hard time letting go of you once I got you. I wouldn't want to let Danetta have you back."

At the mention of Danetta's name, Jaxon transformed. He sat up stiffly and buttoned his shirt, moving ever so slightly away from Kieran on the couch and not meeting his gaze.

"I made a promise to her, and I am going to follow through," Jaxon said somberly. "I should go," he said, getting up and adjusting his jeans, his erection still fairly obvious. He untucked his shirt in an effort to hide the bulge, smoothing the shirttails nervously.

"Probably," Kieran agreed, not trusting himself to say any more.

"Are you still coming to the rehearsal dinner tomorrow?" Jaxon asked, almost hopefully, when he was nearly to the door.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Kieran asked.

"No, I want you to come. You should meet my family. I still want to spend time with you. I don't know," Jaxon's voice faltered, his confusion obvious, and it tore at Kieran's heart.

"I can't go. I don't want to see you with her, and I can't be around your families. I know I'll do something or say something, or *feel* something, and everyone will figure out my feelings for you." Kieran knew he really should go to the dinner, if only because of his column, but he wasn't sure he could handle all of these emotions. Maybe tomorrow he'd feel differently, but he didn't want to get Jaxon's hopes up. It would probably be better for Jaxon, too, if Kieran wasn't there.

"If you change your mind—"

"I won't change my mind," Kieran said firmly. "But I'll go to your bachelor party on Friday, if you want." A smaller group of Jaxon's close friends—no Danetta, no parents—would be more manageable. Everyone would be drinking and they probably wouldn't catch on even if Kieran let something slip.

"Yeah? That would be great," Jaxon said, seeming relieved.

Kieran held the door open and Jaxon left. He watched Jaxon walk down to the street before closing the door and pressing his head against it, trying to calm the explosion of emotions and thoughts racing around his brain. Kieran knew it was the right thing for Jaxon to leave tonight. It couldn't

have ended any differently or any better if he'd stayed, and it would probably have been a whole lot worse for everyone involved.

No matter how impossible it seemed, Kieran had developed strong feelings for Jaxon after knowing him for only a few days. *There couldn't be a more inappropriate person to be falling in love with*, Kieran thought ironically. Not only was Jaxon supposed to be getting married in three days, but Kieran was only here to do a job; not to fall in love with the subject of his column. Life in Buckwheat Springs went on before Kieran got here, and it would go on long after Kieran had written his column and left. He was supposed to just pass through as an observer. It was ridiculous of him to think that he could change anything about that, that he could change Jaxon. Kieran had no right to do it, and in fact had probably made things harder for Jaxon all around.

He hoped that no one who saw the two of them together had any idea of the bond formed between them. It could only make life miserable for Jaxon if anyone in town thought he might be gay.

On the other hand, when Kieran's column came out, it would good to portray Jaxon so harshly. No one would suspect anything had happened if Kieran could write such unkind things about Jaxon. And if Jaxon still had any lingering feelings for Kieran, reading such awful things about himself should quickly dispel them.

Danetta might never find out that Jaxon had come here with the intention of taking their friendship farther; and it was unlikely that Jaxon would tell her, especially because he was

clearly so concerned about not hurting her. How ironic, considering Danetta had hurt so many men before Jaxon—men who still cared for and protected her.

That reminded Kieran that the best thing he could do for Jaxon was to find out Danetta's secret before the wedding. He was certain that if Jaxon knew what it was, he'd reconsider his decision to marry her. It was odd, Kieran thought, how when he first arrived he was focused on whether Danetta would go through with the wedding. Kieran was now convinced she would—and it was the worst possible outcome he could imagine.

He knew there was no way to get out of going to the wedding. It was his job to be there and write about it. Kieran might have been able to get the pre-wedding part of his column written fairly painlessly, but he knew it would be nearly impossible emotionally to write the final part.

Sitting back down at the table, Kieran poured a large shot of tequila into his glass and downed it, feeling it sear his throat, distracting him from Jaxon's visit and the way he felt in Kieran's arms and how he'd responded to Kieran's touch. Tequila seemed to be the only thing that could keep Kieran's thoughts from wandering. He took another large shot. He'd drunk half the bottle so far, he realized, and suddenly began to feel the full effect of it. Kieran quickly got ready for bed, where he passed out in a tequila-flavored cloud of loneliness.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

Thursday

Kieran waked around noon, feeling even worse than he had the previous morning. He had a pounding headache, but that didn't compare to the sick feeling he had about Jaxon. Knowing they had shared feelings that they wouldn't have a chance to pursue a million times worse than the simple uncertainty Kieran felt the previous day. This time he knew exactly what he was missing out on.

Jaxon had made it perfectly clear that he was going to marry Danetta no matter what; even though it was just as obvious that he wasn't completely ready to get married. If he was, he would never have come to Kieran's motel room the night before. But Danetta had some mystical hold over Jaxon.

The only thing left for Kieran was to find out exactly what that secret was. Either he would unearth something that could stop Jaxon from marrying Danetta, or he would discover something to convince him Jaxon belonged with her. Time was running out.

Kieran thought about all the things people had told him since he arrived. The bridesmaids mentioned some sort of formula Danetta had. Kieran considered that his starting point. He knew Danetta and Sam didn't seem to care much for each other, so he figured he could go to her for more information.

Then there was something Kieran remembered hearing while talking with the ex-grooms that he hadn't noticed at the

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

time; but later on, it had jumped out at him—a reaction, something Danetta hadn't been able to hide, though she'd played everything else just about perfectly. Based on that, he had a few things for Alexa to research.

Kieran hopped in the shower, dressed, and headed down Main Street to start his investigation.

* * * *

Kieran tracked down Dinah, the bridesmaid who spotted a pattern in Danetta's relationships, and followed up with another visit to Sam and Tom. Sam didn't hold back with her opinions; but with Tom, Kieran needed to be subtle. He couldn't risk completely tipping him off or alienating him—or worse, having Tom warn the other men to steer clear of Kieran. But Kieran could tell he was on the right track from some of Tom's responses. He phoned Alexa to discuss his theory and she made some suggestions of how he could track down specific proof. Unfortunately, he needed to speak with Danetta's parents, and dropped by their house to ask them a few things about Danetta's career, ostensibly background for the column. They probably never suspected just what he'd been getting at, and thankfully he was able to leave before he was forced to eat or drink anything Lorraine prepared.

Thursday evening was spent making more phone calls and eating another take-out meal in his motel room as he went over his notes, trying to work out the pieces of the puzzle. He couldn't quite see the picture yet, but at least now he knew which pieces he needed. He could have gone to the rehearsal

and dinner, but decided it was a much better use of his time to figure out Danetta's secret.

* * * *

Friday

Friday morning Kieran drove to Dallas to speak in person with a few of Mike's friends and relatives. No one wanted to talk on the phone, but Kieran was finally able to convince a couple of people to meet him.

After the meetings, Kieran had a pretty good idea of what Mike had been hiding. He just needed to see if he could confirm with Tom and Jordan, or any of their friends. A few more phone calls and well-placed lies, and Kieran got a couple of people to reveal something they thought he already knew.

By mid-afternoon, Kieran knew the secret. He had determined how Danetta was able to get four men to propose to her, regardless of the fact that she'd previously left grooms at the altar again and again. Everything fell into place: why the three men moved to Buckwheat Springs; uprooting their lives for a woman who, while beautiful, was still rather average in every other way. Maybe he wasn't the best judge of that, but it all fit.

He knew why three men, even after Danetta jilted them in the worst possible and most humiliating way, didn't hold it against her; and still refused to reveal to anyone her explanation of why she'd done it. Danetta was a genius, and she'd devised a nearly foolproof plan to snag a husband. The only thing Kieran still couldn't understand was why she didn't go through with any of the weddings. The men were all good-

looking, kind, successful, and definitely husband material—and every single one of them had clearly been devoted to her.

What Kieran found out turned his stomach; and he knew Jaxon needed the truth before he married Danetta—especially because she seemed so determined go through with it this time. Kieran admitted that Danetta appeared to be very much in love with Jaxon, and Kieran was now convinced she'd actually marry Jaxon. The only option was for Kieran to talk to Danetta, tell her he knew, and force her to tell Jaxon herself. He would make sure Jaxon knew the truth. He couldn't wait to get back to Buckwheat Springs and confront her.

Kieran had one other thing he needed to do. He pulled out his cell phone, activated the voice dialing function, and called Jeff.

"This is Jeff. I actually have a life so I don't have time to talk to you. Leave it at the beep." Kieran cursed as the voicemail message played

"Look, Jeff, I found out something that could change the entire spin of this piece, so I want to make some changes on what I've already sent you. I'm pulling it back for the time being. *Don't* do anything with it yet. Don't even read it, okay? Get back to me as soon as you can. Thanks."

Fuck! Kieran prayed Jeff would call back soon. He focused his concentration back on the road and put his foot down on the gas pedal, trying to get back to Buckwheat Springs as quickly as possible.

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Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

When he arrived just after 8 p.m. back in town, Kieran drove straight to the Victorian house Danetta and Jaxon shared. Tonight was Jaxon's bachelor party, and afterward he was staying at the Trail Dust. Danetta thought it would be more seemly if they didn't leave together in the morning for their wedding. Armed with this information, Kieran was confident he wouldn't run into Jaxon before he had a chance to speak with Danetta. He parked crookedly in front of the house and ran up to the door, jamming his finger repeatedly on the doorbell and banging on the door for emphasis a few times. Danetta finally appeared.

"Hi, Kieran," she said with a look of confusion. "What's your emergency? I expected you to be at the dinner for Jaxon?"

"I have to take care of something first," he said. "With you."

"Why, Kieran, you're attractive and all, but aren't you gay?" she asked, giggling and treating him to a flirtatious smile.

Narcissistic bitch, Kieran thought, though that wasn't the worst name he'd called her in his mind that day. "I need to *talk* to you, that's all," he said angrily. He shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from curling them into fists.

"Well, come on in," Danetta said, moving out of the doorway to let him pass. "A couple of my bridesmaids are coming over soon, so I hope this won't take all night. Though I can't possibly guess what you could want to talk to *me* about." She sounded confused but suspicious, and her initial friendliness was dissolving. "I already told you I'm not having

second thoughts about tomorrow. I *am* going to marry Jaxon. I know that's going to ruin your article, isn't it?" Her voice had chilled, sending a warning to Kieran.

"You don't have any idea why I'm here? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I don't care much for your language, Kieran," she said, attempting to impersonate a lady. Kieran wasn't fooled. He knew who and what she really was, and now he had proof. "Unless you're trying to get me to stand Jaxon up at the altar—but you're wasting your breath."

"You're right. I don't want you to go through with it tomorrow."

"I'm not going to leave him. I'm definitely marrying Jaxon tomorrow, so you can stop trying to manipulate the situation just to get a good story. Go and get along and party with him tonight, because once we're married there won't be any more drunk fests with the boys." Her voice turned cold and unfeeling on the last line.

"I'm here to keep you from marrying him," Kieran told her.

Danetta just stared at him, her eyes narrowing as she tried to work out what he was getting at. "Of course your article will be so much more interesting if I do another runner, I get it," she said nastily. "But I thought Jaxon's your friend. Do you really want to hurt him like that? It doesn't make any sense."

"No, Danetta, this has absolutely nothing to do with my column. I'm only trying to save him from a life of lies and deception with you."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I know all about the baby," Kieran said, curious to see how she would react.

"Baby?" Danetta repeated, as if she didn't know what he was referring to.

"The baby that wasn't there," he said. It had finally twigged what that psychic's words had meant after Kieran spoke with Mike's Aunt Bette. Not that Kieran actually believed in psychics, but this phrase had puzzled him. "Your fake pregnancy story that you used to get Mike—then Jaxon—to propose to you."

Danetta opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. For once she was speechless. Kieran hadn't expected it would be this easy to get her to admit what she'd done, but she'd obviously been so shocked he'd found out that she couldn't even come up with any sort of defense.

"I know all about what you did with Mike, and I discovered you did the same thing with Jordan, and now Jaxon. I couldn't find out anything from Tom directly, but Mike and Jordan are enough of a pattern. And I remembered how strangely you acted when Tom mentioned that his wife was impatient for their baby to be born."

"Mike *told* you?" she asked, clearly shocked.

"Everything."

"He told you why he moved here, and why I didn't marry him?"

"Yes," Kieran lied. *Well, close enough.*

"He promised never to say anything! I don't believe you."

"Well, you've just confirmed it by your reaction," Kieran said. He felt like saying "Aha!" as if they were in some Agatha

Christie production, but this was all too serious to joke about. "I've pieced together what you did, and I'm disgusted by it. You need to tell Jaxon the truth; you owe that to him."

"What do you think you know?" Danetta asked, challenging Kieran.

"I talked to a lot of people. I put a lot of random facts together. It might look like I'm hanging around doing nothing, but I'm actually pretty good at my job. It seems you've been refining your plan over the years. But basically, you meet someone, maybe more than one, while you're out of town on an extended business trip. You see them a lot during the time you're there. With Mike and Jaxon it was Dallas, with Jordan it was Austin. You make them think you have fallen in love with them and don't want to end things when you come back here. They accept a long-distance relationship for a time, seeing you as often as possible, but never here. You always visit them. You go along until you sense the distance is starting to be a problem, and then you gauge their interest in moving here. You encourage them. Somewhere along the line, in order to keep things going, you tell the guy you're pregnant. You tell him you want to keep the baby, because you love him so much."

"You have an amazing imagination," Danetta said coolly, interrupting Kieran's train of thought. "You should really write novels instead of those bitchy columns you do now."

"It's true, and I have proof. You pretend you're pregnant, and that you want his baby so much, you'll raise it on your own. Of course none of them can let you do that. They're all kind, generous and principled. This is where you convince

them to move here, to be with you, and have the baby together. So they move here, rebuilding their professional lives, for you, and then not long after that, there's a 'problem' and you 'lose' the baby. And it happens while you're out of town for something else, so they can't figure out that you never went to a hospital. You're so distraught by this that somehow you get them to propose, because you've gotten them so thrilled at the idea of having a baby, and they really do love you. That's how you got men to keep proposing; because quite frankly, this is something that lots of men would fall for."

"That's quite a theory, Sherlock," Danetta sneered. "But how on earth could I go around pretending to be pregnant four times and have no one figure it out? That's impossible. Your story is ridiculous."

"That's where you were really devious," Kieran replied, almost impressed with just how scheming she had been. "You asked each of them to keep your pregnancy a secret, because you live in a small town, and you don't want people to know until it's the right time. And there is where you really did the impossible. Because after you 'lost' the baby, for some reason you decided you didn't want to marry any of them. But still you used the baby as your excuse when you explained to Mike and Tom and Jordan why you left them at the altar. And you pleaded with them to forgive you and to please keep the whole thing private, because it's just too painful for you to think about or talk about, ever. So they've all kept their mouths shut, even with each other. None of them even brings up the subject of *why* you dumped them when they're

together. I've asked them all, and they say they never asked any of the others! They're all still protecting you from the pain of losing the 'baby,' and that's why even when they see you with a new man, no one of them holds it against you.

Kieran was out of breath and completely worked up when he finished. He waited as he caught his breath to see how Danetta would respond. Kieran knew he had probably gotten some of the details wrong; but overall, he was pretty sure he had the gist of it right. He looked at Danetta. She sat down in an armchair, tears running down her cheeks.

"You can't tell Jaxon that story, please," she sobbed, shaking her head slowly, pleadingly.

"Your crocodile tears don't work with me," Kieran said coldly.

He watched Danetta cry for a few moments. When she'd calmed down a bit he continued. "You know, Jaxon doesn't deserve the lies and the deception. He's a kind, gentle person who only wants to take care of you and make you happy—even at the expense of his own happiness. None of them deserved this, Danetta. How could you not only lie and trick them into wanting to marry you, but then jilt them at the altar? Did you even love any of them?"

"You're right. None of them deserved it. They were all kind and loving and would have done anything I asked after I lost the 'baby.' You're right about most of that. I just can't believe you figured it all out," Danetta said, her voice small.

Kieran could barely hear her, so he moved to the chair next to the one in which she sat. She paused for a few moments before she resumed speaking. "I *did* love them. I

really loved all of them. But not as much as I thought, when it came to the big day. I want to get married, have a family, and have a happy ending. Who doesn't?" She looked directly into Kieran's eyes. "But I was also afraid of being married. I mean, look at my parents." She gestured vaguely in the air with one hand, as if conjuring up their presence. "You saw how they are together? My mother is constantly nagging my father, getting him to bend over backward, and he keeps doing it—no matter how badly she treats him. I don't want that. I don't want to *be* that! I don't want us to grow old and hate each other, or for *my* husband to turn into a doormat. I convinced myself I was deeply enough in love with each of them, and that it couldn't happen to us." Her voice faltered.

Kieran waited for her to finish.

"And then, at the altar, I was standing there, in a beautiful dress and next to a man I really did love, and I glanced over at my mother, with her frilly dresses and big hair and too much makeup, and I panicked. I saw *my* future sitting there and I couldn't run away fast enough. That's how it happened, all three times."

"I just can't find any compassion for you, Danetta," Kieran said. "You must realize that." She nodded, tears still streaking her face. "I think those three men are lucky you ran. I'm sure you would have made life miserable for any of them."

"You know, maybe it doesn't mean much; but with Tom, I really was pregnant. After I lost the baby, I realized how much more he seemed to love me. He would have done anything to make up for that loss. So with Jordan and Mike, I got the idea that I could use something like that to get them

to commit. But in the end, I didn't want to marry them either. When I met Jaxon, he seemed perfect and I used the same lies. I didn't want to risk having him leave me; so I lied to be sure he would stay and marry me." Danetta was crying, head down, avoiding Kieran's eyes, finally honest about what she'd done. Kieran was convinced she cried only for herself and what she'd lost, and not because she thought she'd actually done anything wrong or hurt anyone else.

"You need to tell Jaxon the truth and let him make up his own mind whether he still wants to marry you. If you don't tell him, I will."

"No, Kieran!" she protested, her head snapping up. "Please don't say anything to him! I really do want to marry him. I know he'll make me happy."

"What about making *him* happy?" Kieran asked. "Doesn't Jaxon's happiness mean anything to you?" It turned his stomach that she still saw everything from her own selfish perspective. He felt a wave of pity for whoever ended up married to her, and prayed it wouldn't be Jaxon.

"He'll be happy with me. He's happy now, isn't he? He likes taking care of me. And if he thinks he's making me happy, he *will* be happy."

Kieran was silent for a moment, thinking about how Jaxon had come to his hotel room two nights earlier. The truth was that Jaxon was nowhere near as content with his life now as Danetta believed.

"Jaxon's different from the others, isn't he? He's really something special."

"Yes, he is. I don't see him turning into my father. He's got a certain confidence about him, but not in a way that makes him arrogant or overbearing. I'm sure it comes from working with teenagers. He gets their respect and trust and he encourages them to do their best. I love seeing him with his students," Danetta said. Kieran could tell she was sincere.

"I've seen him at work, so I know what you mean. He's definitely not one you want to get away," Kieran said. Jaxon was too much of a catch for his own good. That made it even worse that someone as undeserving as Danetta would be getting him. *Jaxon should be with someone who loves him the way he deserves to be loved*, Kieran thought, *without playing tricks on him*.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you're falling in love with him, Kieran," Danetta said, almost sneering.

"I am," Kieran admitted.

"You can't possibly think he'd choose you over me," she said, incredulous. "He's not even gay. And you've known him, what, five days? That's nothing compared to the things we've been through together."

"None of that was real, Danetta, and Jaxon deserves to know that. You can't build real, lasting love on lies."

"Did you tell Mike it was a lie about the baby? After he told you?"

"Mike didn't tell me about the baby," Kieran admitted.

"You said you found out from him! You sneaky bastard! You tricked me?"

"I found out from his aunt," Kieran replied.

"Aunt? What aunt?"

"Aunt Bette." Danetta didn't seem to recognize the name. "The one who helped raise him when he was a teenager and his mother was very ill for a long time." Kieran wasn't even surprised she couldn't remember something as important as that about a man she'd professed to love so much. "I met with her in Dallas this afternoon, and I implied that I knew all about it. She just kept talking and confirmed my suspicions."

"So, what are you going to do now? Are you going to put all of this in your article?" Danetta asked, as if she were more concerned about what people thought of her than of what she needed to do to keep Jaxon.

"No, I'm not that cruel. I don't particularly care about your feelings, but I don't think it's fair to the men. But I might change my mind unless you tell Jaxon the truth about lying to him—*before* the wedding. I'll bet the other guys would probably rather have the whole mess of lies revealed than let Jaxon be tricked into marrying you. Or you can just do a runner tomorrow, and save yourself any potential embarrassment. No one would bat an eyelash around here if you stood Jaxon up. Then you can keep your disgusting secrets. I'll let you decide," Kieran told her. "Now, I'm going to a bachelor party. I hope I don't see you tomorrow at the church."

Kieran got up without waiting for a response and walked out the front door.

* * * *

Kieran hadn't seen Jaxon since Wednesday night when Jaxon left his motel room. He had no idea what Jaxon had

been feeling or thinking about what had happened between them.

By the time Kieran got to La Piñata, Jaxon was already more than a bit tipsy. Mike, Tom, and Jordan were ordering more drinks for him. Jaxon hadn't eaten much of his meal yet, so after Kieran sat down in the booth next to him, he grabbed a fork and took a bite of enchilada from Jaxon's plate.

"Kier, you finally made it! I was worried about you," Jaxon said, smiling and laughing and genuinely glad to see Kieran. Then he smacked Kieran's hand. "Get your own dinner!"

"You don't seem to be eating this one," Kieran pointed out, "so I'm making sure it doesn't go to waste." He took one more forkful of food, stuffed it into his mouth, and relinquished the fork.

"I'm eating, I'm eating!" Jaxon said and took a few bites of food. "See?"

"Don't feel the need to show me, okay?" Kieran teased. "You're acting like your students."

A waitress came by. Kieran ordered his meal and turned back to the table.

"So, Kieran, where ya been? No one's seen you since yesterday afternoon," Jordan said. "We all thought you might have gotten lucky with a secret lover, and that's why you missed the rehearsal dinner. We've been trying to figure out who else is MIA around here." Everyone laughed, except for Jaxon. He glanced over at Kieran shyly.. Kieran though that maybe he saw a hint of jealous curiosity about what he *had* been doing.

"I was working, believe it or not! I do have a job to do," Kieran explained. "I had to go to Dallas to interview a few people." He didn't say that he'd met with Mike's aunt, but she might have mentioned it to him. Mike didn't bring it up.

"Dallas?!" Jaxon exclaimed with a mouthful of food. Kieran was glad to see he was eating, or he would pass out before too long. "Who were you talking to? All of my friends and relatives are here for the wedding. You've hardly even talked to my family for your column."

"I can't reveal my sources," Kieran said with a laugh. He took a sip from one of the drinks arrayed in front of Jaxon, earning another playful slap.

"Hey!" Jaxon said, pretending to be angry and pouting slightly. Kieran forced himself to ignore Jaxon's full lips.

"You have more than enough. I need to catch up."

"Well, at least ask first. My stuff isn't just here for the taking, ya know. But if you ask nicely," Jaxon said invitingly, and Kieran suspected Jaxon wasn't just talking about his dinner and drinks. *Wishful thinking*, Kieran admitted.

Jaxon treated Kieran to a beautiful dimpled smile and took a gulp of green margarita, licking stray grains of salt off his lower lip as he swallowed. Kieran felt himself hardening, especially as Jaxon swept his tongue across his lip. He refused to believe that Jaxon was completely oblivious to the effect he had on Kieran; but there was nothing he could say or do with Mike, Tom and Jordan across the table from them.

Surprisingly, Kieran enjoyed the rest of the dinner. It was good fun as Jordan, Mike and Tom joked with Jaxon about how or when Danetta would decide to run the following day.

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

They said there was a pool going on how far she'd get down the aisle and half the folks in town had played. Jaxon laughed, seemingly unworried about the possibility that his bride would get cold feet. When they finished eating, the five of them got ready to go. Tom paid the bill and they stumbled down the street to Sam's saloon.

Jaxon was greeted inside with shouts and cheers from some of his other friends and acquaintances, including some teachers from the high school. After spending most of the past week with Jaxon, Kieran had concluded that he didn't really have any close friends. Jaxon spent most of his time at work or with Danetta, but was probably closest to the other three grooms. Kieran was pleased to see so many people had turned out to wish Jaxon the best. Or not, as it turned out. Nearly everyone who came up to greet Jaxon offered a drink and rude remark about Danetta. Jaxon shrugged off the remarks good-naturedly.

"Jax, I need to tell you something important," Kieran said in Jaxon's ear, trying to ease him away from the crowd of well-wishers.

"Okay, what is it?" Jaxon asked, wavering slightly. He leaned back against the wall for support.

"I need to tell you something about Danetta. Something really important." He couldn't let Jaxon marry Danetta without knowing the truth.

"Look, I'm getting enough shit from everyone else around here. They think it's all in fun, but it's getting to me now. I don't need you badmouthing her, too. I thought we were pals, that you understood what I have to do."

"We are, which is why—"

"You know I told you I was going to marry her, no matter what we..." Jaxon paused, suddenly unable to meet Kieran's gaze. "Can't you just be happy for me now? Be optimistic that everything's going to be fine? I don't want to talk about Danetta with *anyone*, especially you. I just want to us have some fun."

"I honestly want you to be happy, Jax, which is why you need to know the truth, and decide yourself—"

"If you want to be happy for me, you'll come back to the table and have another drink and stop thinking so much, okay? It's only going to hurt both of us now. I shouldn't have said or done anything the other night. I need for you to let it go, like it never happened."

"Okay," Kieran said, though he didn't really drink much the rest of the evening. He tried to smile and get into a celebratory mood, but he couldn't help feeling miserable for so many different reasons. He'd never forget it happened, or that Jaxon had been the one to want it in the first place. He couldn't just sit quietly as Jaxon ruined his life. But it wasn't Kieran's decision to make. All he could do was make sure Jaxon knew the truth about Danetta before the wedding.

The party continued until it was clear that Jaxon needed to get to bed if there was any chance of him being awake and sober at his wedding the following afternoon. Kieran offered to get him back to the Trail Dust, since he was going there anyway. They headed off in the direction of the hotel as the party continued without the groom.

* * * *

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

Inside Jaxon's room at the Trail Dust, Kieran helped him get ready for bed and forced him to drink a couple of glasses of water. He pulled down the bed covers for him to climb in and Jaxon practically fell down on the bed. Kieran knew Jaxon was drunk, but it was hard to tell *how* drunk.

"Jaxon, you need to listen to me," Kieran said again. Jaxon didn't want to hear it and put his hand over Kieran's mouth, staring up into his eyes. The fingers were warm, and Kieran fought the urge to kiss them. He was pretty sure Jaxon wouldn't mind, and might possibly even be glad he did; but Kieran was determined not to take advantage of Jaxon's drunkenness. He knew that this was the last chance to test the waters between them, but Kieran didn't make a move even though he knew he might regret the decision forever.

"No, Kieran," Jaxon said, shaking his head vigorously, fingers still pressed to Kieran's lips. Though Jaxon's eyes were unfocused from the alcohol, Kieran could see that he was still looking into Kieran's eyes with a mixture of affection and regret before closing them.

"Jax, don't go to sleep yet," Kieran shook Jaxon's shoulder. "Do me one favor, please?" Kieran pleaded. "I'm going to leave you a note, okay? Please, *please*, read this before the wedding. Will you promise me? You need to know this before you make a final decision."

"Yeah," Jaxon mumbled, more asleep than awake. "Promise, I'll read it," he slurred, but he opened his eyes and gave Kieran another look that tore at his heart. A look that said he wished things could have turned out differently, but

that he wouldn't break his promise to Danetta. Then Jaxon fell asleep.

Kieran watched him sleep for a few minutes, then leaned down and pressed his mouth to Jaxon's soft, beautiful lips, lingering much longer than a simple brush, but not enough to disturb Jaxon. It was much less than what Kieran would like from Jaxon, but it was more than he should have done, considering the situation.

Then he got up and walked to the table near the door to write the note to Jaxon, explaining that Danetta had lied about being pregnant so she could get Jaxon to move here and propose; and that she'd done the same with Mike and Jordan. He didn't put anything about his own feelings or what he thought Jaxon should do. Kieran propped the folded paper up near the mirror on the dresser, noticing Jaxon's tuxedo hanging up on a rack nearby. *Jaxon will look fantastic in that*, Kieran thought to himself. His heart sank., but seeing it brought home to Kieran that the wedding tomorrow was a reality, and it was still going to happen—unless ... Kieran just hoped Jaxon would keep his promise to read the note.

Not wanting to leave but knowing nothing good would come of staying, Kieran walked to the door. He didn't notice when Jaxon opened his eyes to watch him let himself out and quietly close the door. Kieran trudged dejectedly back to his own room and threw himself onto the bed, still fully clothed, and thought for a minute about whether he'd done the right thing.

He'd come to Texas to write a story and ridicule a group of people who a week earlier he hadn't even known. *Do I have*

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

the right to mess with their lives beyond that? he wondered. *Do I have the right to interfere with Jaxon and Danetta?* Even though he was certain Danetta had tricked Jaxon into this marriage, Jaxon had said he *wanted* to marry her and thought that it would make him happy. *Is ignorance truly bliss?* Only Jaxon could decide that now, by deciding whether or not to read the note. Kieran tossed and turned and begged for sleep to take him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

Saturday

Kieran waked later than he'd expected. He called Jaxon's room, but there was no answer. Kieran was sure that if Jaxon changed his mind after reading the note, he would have told Kieran about it. If Jaxon decided to go through with it, he'd avoid Kieran and any further opportunities for him to dissuade him. It was also possible that Jaxon hadn't even read the note yet: the worst possible scenario, but one Kieran had to consider.

All these possibilities raced around Kieran's mind as he quickly showered and dressed in the suit he packed for the wedding. It was one of his favorites: a blue silk and wool Zegna that looked great on him.

Kieran remembered he hadn't heard back from Jeff yet either. He grabbed his cell phone, hoping he could get in touch with him before he left for the church. Kieran found a voicemail from Jeff, saying he'd gotten the message and was looking forward to Kieran's revisions; but that he read and loved what was already sent.

Kieran understood he needed to attend the wedding. Job aside, he knew he had to see Jaxon and Danetta get married in order to put his feelings for Jaxon behind him. He had to see Jaxon knowingly choose to stay with Danetta, even after having all the information. Kieran had to *hear* Jaxon say "I do." Only then could he be certain there was nothing there for the two of them to pursue.

Jaxon and Mike—the best man—were already standing in their places by the time Kieran arrived. The church was packed: It seemed everyone in town wanted to see whether Danetta would really go through with it. The overwhelming scent of flowers mixed with perfume and the noise to make Kieran's head pound.

Jaxon briefly caught Kieran's eye before he was shown to a seat on the aisle halfway back on the groom's side. Kieran's stomach churned with worry and fear. He glanced at Jaxon, who smiled back at him. *Damn*, Jaxon looked fantastic in his tuxedo, even more handsome and desirable than Kieran had imagined, smiling and looked genuinely happy.

The music started, and the bridesmaids glided up the aisle in a cloud of perfume and roses, their dresses rustling. Kieran couldn't take his eyes off Jaxon. Oddly enough, Jaxon's gaze seemed fixed on Kieran, who watched the man's expression change from happiness to uncertainty to understanding and finally to resignation.

He must be nervous, Kieran thought, noticing Jaxon fiddle in his pocket. He pulled out the note Kieran had written the night before, slowly unfolding it as the bridesmaids took their seats.

Oh no, Kieran thought with horror. *Is Jaxon just reading the note now?* Kieran couldn't see Jaxon's face, but he seemed to be whispering to Mike as the music announced that the bride had entered the church. Danetta walked slowly past Kieran, holding onto her father's arm, in an elegant V-necked dress with a softly pleated skirt. She turned toward Kieran with a triumphant look on her face. He wondered

briefly how he'd ever thought she was pretty or sweet when they met.

Jaxon's expression was unreadable as he watched Danetta walk toward him. He glanced repeatedly at Kieran, who flashed an apologetic look.

Danetta reached Jaxon. They turned to face the minister, who prepared to speak. Kieran noticed Jaxon lean down and whisper to Danetta.

"How could you lie to me about something *like that*?" Jaxon said angrily. With a look of sadness and disgust, Jaxon ran from the church.

A shocked roar erupted from the guests as he departed. Danetta walked over to Kieran and began to hit him with her bouquet, striking his chest at first and then his face, the thorns from the roses leaving streaks of blood on his cheek where they ripped at his flesh. Kieran barely felt the pain.

"You bastard!" Danetta shouted. "You fucking bastard! It's all your fault! You told him! You told him!" Several guests and bridesmaids rushed over to calm her down.

Kieran took the opportunity to leave as the church broke into chaos. A few people shouted at Kieran, since the fiasco clearly had something to with him. He managed to escape and get back to his room at the Trail Dust without incident.

* * * *

When Kieran opened the door to his room, he found Jaxon waiting for him, sitting on the couch still in his tuxedo. His bowtie was untied and dangled around his neck. He looked as miserable as anyone Kieran had ever seen. As thrilled as he

was that Jaxon chose to find him after abandoning Danetta in the church, Kieran knew that right now Jaxon needed a friend first and foremost, regardless of what other emotions and hopes he might have for their relationship.

"Are you okay?" was all Kieran could think to say as he closed the door and walked to the couch where Jaxon sat cradling the half-empty bottle of tequila Kieran had been drinking the other night.

"You were right. I should have listened to you last night," Jaxon said listlessly, and took a long swig from the bottle. A few drops of tequila trickled down his chin and he tried to lick them off. "Why didn't I listen to you? Why did I *believe* her? Why?" Jaxon's voice shook.

"Let me have some of that," Kieran asked, and held out his hand for the tequila. Instead of taking a drink he put it on the dresser on the other side of the room. The last thing Jaxon needed now was tequila.

"Hey!" Jaxon protested, too drained to get up and retrieve the bottle. He sat there frowning and grumbling before falling silent again.

"Can you tell me how you found out she'd lied about the baby?" Jaxon asked after a long pause, his voice wavering. It was clear that learning the truth about the baby had broken him.

Kieran sat down on the couch with Jaxon and explained how he'd figured everything out: with whom he spoke the day before, and what he'd discovered. Jaxon seemed even more shattered to hear Danetta admitted Kieran was right when

he'd confronted her, but refused to tell Jaxon the truth herself.

"How could she have lied to me like that? I admit I was pretty surprised when she said she was pregnant; we'd been careful, but birth control isn't 100 percent. But when she called me to tell me she'd lost it, I was really devastated. I felt so worried about her. I played right into her hands," Jaxon said, and the tears finally broke through.

Kieran wanted to hold Jaxon in his arms to make him feel safe and loved, to let him know he wasn't a fool. Instead he rubbed Jaxon's shoulder and waited to see what else Jaxon wanted or needed. After a while, Jaxon calmed down and wiped roughly at his face with tissues from a box Kieran brought over from the bedside table.

"I'm sorry," Jaxon said, suddenly self-conscious.

"Hey, this is a really huge thing for you to process. It's going to take time, and it's going to hurt. Just let me know what you need. Okay?"

"Thanks. I really do appreciate you warning me, telling me the truth about her. I know you did it to protect me."

"What are you going to do now?" Kieran asked.

"How long can I stay here?" Jaxon asked, as if hiding would solve everything.

"At least until some of the excitement dies down outside," Kieran offered. They could hear people talking noisily as they walked past the motel. "You need to talk to Danetta and probably your parents, at the bare minimum."

"I know. I'm just not sure what to say," Jaxon said listlessly.

"So, you can stay here while you figure it out, but they'll probably come looking for you at some point. If I go show myself around town maybe that will keep them from coming here looking for *me*. I'm surprised no one's come by yet."

"Why would they be looking for *you*?" Jaxon asked, looking confused. "I know they're out for my blood after I left Danetta at the altar, but—"

"Maybe because Danetta attacked me with her bouquet after you left. It's probably pretty obvious that I've got something to do with what happened."

"She did? Sorry. Yeah, you've got some blood on your face," Jaxon said, his voice toneless and distracted as if he'd just noticed the red streaks.

Kieran touched his cheek and his fingers came away with a smear of blood. He turned and looked in the mirror to see the damage. There were a couple of gashes where the thorns had scraped the skin. Nothing major, he didn't need a plastic surgeon or anything, probably just some antiseptic.

"You might want to change your clothes, Jax. Do you have something to change into in your room here?" Kieran asked, forgetting his face for the time being. "I don't mind going to get it for you."

"Yeah, thanks," Jaxon said with relief, fishing around in his jacket pocket, locating the key, and handing it to Kieran.

Kieran quickly went down the hallway to Jaxon's room and retrieved a pair of jeans, a shirt, and the shoes he'd worn the previous night. Jaxon was in the same spot when Kieran returned.

"After I read your note, I showed it to Mike," Jaxon said, standing and beginning to change clothes. "He told me she'd lost a baby with him, too. That just seemed like too much of a coincidence. When she came up to stand with me I asked her whether was true. She didn't say anything. I could see from her expression she had lied. I can't believe she could keep lying like that.

"She asked me to keep quiet about it all, not tell anyone about her being pregnant. I was okay with that. It's a small town, so I understood her situation. And then after, she said losing a baby was too painful to share with anyone—not even our parents. All I wanted to do was comfort her and make her happy, so I went along with whatever she asked. I felt like it was my fault she was so unhappy. I would have done anything."

"It's not your fault that any of it happened," Kieran said, joining Jaxon on the couch. "You wouldn't have any reason to think she'd lied about any of it; and she was very clever in how she got you all to keep everything a secret so no one would figure out what she'd done."

"I feel like a complete idiot."

"You're just a guy who fell in love with a girl who wasn't quite what she appeared to be," Kieran said. "It happens all the time. Just be glad that you found out in time."

"How come no one here figured it out? You're a total stranger and within a few days you not only figured out she was hiding something, but what it was."

"Well, a couple of things. Probably before I showed up, no one interviewed all the other guys together with her. I noticed

some things I couldn't understand, and I knew someone had secrets they were hiding. Hell, everyone seemed to be hiding something. As a journalist, it got my attention. Plus, I'm fucking awesome at my job; so of course I knew just how to track down the information I needed and put all the pieces together." He grinned, hoping to get Jaxon to at least crack a smile.

"Great, you're a fucking Columbo. But what am I going to do now?"

"You need to talk to her and decide how you're going to finish breaking up. She still lives with you, right?"

"Oh, fuck. Yeah. It's my house. I mean, I bought it. She can move back in with her parents or something. I don't care. You know, maybe I'll talk with my parents first. That's much easier than dealing with Danetta."

"Okay. How about if I get going, and you can talk to them here?" Kieran offered. "Like I said before, if I'm around town, then people won't be looking for you with me."

"What are you going to say about what happened?"

"If anyone asks me, I'll say they need to talk to you or Danetta. I'm not going to tell anyone what I know."

"What about your column?"

"I wasn't planning on putting anything about how she tricked you, or about the pregnancy, in there, so don't worry about that."

"Maybe you should, sort of payback," Jaxon said with a spiteful tone.

"Jax, I think you might want to focus on tying up loose ends here, and not on getting back at her. It will all come out

soon enough, and then you'll be off the hook as far as the town is concerned, trust me."

"You're probably right," Jaxon agreed. Kieran left.

* * * *

Kieran spent the rest of the afternoon around town, asking people what they thought about the wedding, just as a good journalist would; despite his personal involvement in what had happened. He needed to do a follow-up for his column anyway, and people were more than chatty with their opinions. Most people considered what Jaxon had done to be completely unacceptable. When Kieran reminded them that Danetta had done the same thing three times before they invariably said "This is different!" Because none of the grooms held a grudge against Danetta, her appalling behavior had gone unpunished and was somehow even considered acceptable.

Small-town attitudes and double standards mixed to create a toxic situation for Jaxon, Kieran quickly realized. He hoped his friend would be able to weather the spiteful opinions and comments from most of the people he'd spoken to. But the situation would change dramatically once people learned exactly what Danetta had been up to and for how long. It seemed likely that Mike or Jordan might reveal Danetta's treachery, even if only to support and defend Jaxon. Tom, though, would probably never say anything; she hadn't lied to him.

Treating himself to a large meal in the Copper Caboose, Kieran jotted notes and ideas for his column as a steady

stream of Wheaties in varying degrees of indignation sat down at his booth and chatted or ranted about the events of the day. A few people asked him what he'd done to get Danetta so upset, but he suggested they ask her directly. By the early evening, he began to hear people whispering Danetta's name and discussing what she had done in hushed, shocked voices. Kieran wasn't sure who had finally broken their silence, but it was long overdue. People had stopped badmouthing Jaxon and were starting to express sympathy for how he and the other men had been deceived. Kieran was sure the tide had turned for good here in Buckwheat Springs.

* * * *

It was past 8 p.m. when Kieran got back to his room. There was no sign of Jaxon or his tux, but there was a note on the dresser in the same spot Kieran had put his note to Jaxon in the other man's room the night before. *Had it only been the previous day?* Kieran wondered with a heavy sigh. So much had happened.

Jaxon wanted Kieran to come to his room down the hall, where Kieran found him eating a take-out cheeseburger, presumably from Sam's. In times of stress, cheeseburgers beat out grilled chicken any day of the week. Jaxon had the color back in his face and seemed to be in better spirits than when Kieran left him hours before.

"Man, this burger is good," Jaxon said with his mouth full. "Better than whatever we were going to have at the reception."

"Didn't you get to choose anything for your own wedding?" Kieran asked with a smile. He was glad Jaxon was able to joke about it.

"I went along to the caterers to taste things, but let Danetta make the final decisions. I can't believe what an idiot I was about all that. When I look back, it's so obvious the way she manipulated me."

"When you love someone, if you both love each other, it's not manipulation. It might seem that way now when you see she didn't try to make you happy, while she expected you to be concerned about *her* happiness. It's only a problem when it's all uneven like that."

"That's a better way to look at it. You're pretty good at this stuff, for a guy who's supposedly never been in love before," Jaxon responded. "Hey, I almost forgot! I got some fries for you." Jaxon opened up a Styrofoam box and tossed some ketchup packets at Kieran.

"I just ate at the Copper Caboose, but since you offered, sure." Kieran rarely turned down food, especially curly fries. He sat down at the table with Jaxon and ate the fries, now almost a routine with them. "How did everything go for you this afternoon?"

"Pretty well. I told my parents what you found out and that Danetta admitted everything. They didn't blame me at all for running out on Danetta—not that I thought they would, but they did want some explanation of why I did it. Of course it would have been better had I found out *before* she got down the aisle, but better late than never." Jaxon managed a laugh, which cheered Kieran up.

"And Danetta?"

"She cried a couple gallons of tears and apologized six ways from Sunday, but I told her that there was no way I could ever forgive her or trust her again. Everything was over between us, and she needed to move out of the house before I got back."

"I'll bet she didn't take that well."

"Nope, but after she finished calling you every name in the book and a few I hadn't heard before, she realized there wasn't anything she could say or do now to fix things. She stormed out and I could practically hear her muttering 'Tomorrow is another day,' under her breath," Jaxon laughed a deep genuine laugh, and Kieran couldn't help joining in at the comparison of Danetta to Scarlett O'Hara.

"Get back from where?" Kieran asked. "Are you going to stay at the hotel until she moves out of your house?"

"Right, I didn't tell you what I was thinking about doing," Jaxon said, and shoved a large envelope across the table to Kieran. "I've got two tickets to paradise. If you pack your bags, we can leave—tomorrow morning." Jaxon laughed again as he parodied the line from the old Eddie Money song.

"You're going on the honeymoon?" Kieran asked, surprised as he pulled airline tickets and a hotel confirmation from the envelope. "And you're inviting *me*?" He wasn't sure at all what Jaxon meant by the invitation, or whether he should even consider the possibility of accepting.

"Yes and yes," Jaxon confirmed. "The trip is already paid for, so why waste it? Plus, I need to get out of here for a

while and let things blow over, which gives Danetta time to get all of her shit out of my house and my life."

"And me?"

"You can come along for moral support. Be Tonto, or Sancho Panza or whoever."

"I don't do sidekick. I'm too tall for that, at the minimum," Kieran pointed out.

"Good point. Well, you're welcome to come with me," Jaxon's voice grew serious. "I know we haven't talked about it since the other night, but it would be a good chance to get to know each other better."

Kieran couldn't believe what he was hearing. Jaxon, with whom he was undoubtedly falling in love, had just asked him to go on a trip—a honeymoon—and had all but promised there would be sex. Kieran knew that he absolutely couldn't even think about having any sort of relationship with Jaxon until he'd worked through the collapse of his relationship with Danetta and the reality that his entire future was now going to be drastically different from he planned only 12 hours earlier. Jaxon might seem composed, even cheerful right now; but Kieran was positive he'd break down soon.

. As much as Kieran wanted to be with Jaxon, he certainly didn't want to end up as a rebound relationship "I'll go, under one condition," Kieran said. He couldn't believe the words were leaving his lips. "We go just as friends. We don't go into it expecting anything more than that. You haven't even processed what's happened today, and starting something with me is probably more than you can handle right now. Are you okay with that?"

"Yes. You're right. But I want you as a friend at the very least, and I think you would be good company for me right now. I don't want to go alone, and I don't have anyone else I'd want to go with."

"Okay, then. What time is the plane?"

They discussed logistics and planned to meet first thing in the morning to drive to Amarillo for an 8 a.m. flight.

Back in his room, Kieran placed a quick call to Jeff to make sure he had approval for a slightly extended trip as long as he promised to get his column turned in on time. After gaining Jeff's approval, Kieran packed his bags and tried to get to sleep. *A week in Hawaii with Jaxon*, he mused. Under any other circumstances it would be a dream come true. But now, after what Jaxon had found out, it was likely Kieran would be a shoulder to cry on and nothing more. *It's a start*, he decided.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

Tuesday

Kauai, Hawaii

It was nearly 2 a.m. and Kieran was hunched over his laptop in their hotel room, trying to finish his column. He'd rewritten the entire first part, where he'd made Jaxon out to be a sucker for falling for Danetta. Kieran wanted to avoid violating Jaxon's privacy, and tempered that with what he considered the necessary task of disclosing Danetta's lies. It took a lot of time and creativity to get a good column out of what Kieran was willing to discuss. He leaned back and stretched, loosening the aching muscles in his back and neck, and glanced over at the bed where Jaxon slept soundly.

Jaxon. Kieran looked at him and sighed. The first two days of their stay had been spent swimming, snorkeling, and lazily sipping fruity cocktails at the hotel's private beach. Kieran's inability to keep his eyes off Jaxon in Texas was nothing compared to having Jaxon's well-muscled, near-naked body right there all day, every day. Kieran wondered what he'd expected, coming to a tropical island for a week with Jaxon.

Jaxon's extremely fair skin meant he needed to apply sunscreen frequently; and only Kieran could reach all the places on his shoulders, back, and the backs of his legs. It was exquisite torture—but torture nonetheless—for Kieran to spread lotion on Jaxon every couple of hours, all the while remembering his promise to not venture beyond friendship this week.

Kieran's willpower was at an all-time low. Jaxon must have sensed that, and seemed to taunt Kieran by asking for sunscreen more frequently than strictly necessary. The sun brought out freckles all over Jaxon; and Kieran found himself gazing at them inappropriately, only to discover Jaxon watching him with a sly smile. It certainly didn't help that they were there on a honeymoon package, which meant one bed between them. Kieran struggled to resist Jaxon and his flirtatious behavior. Right now Kieran wasn't tired enough to fall asleep yet, and he didn't want to lie in bed awake, listening to Jaxon's soft breathing practically in his ear, or feel Jaxon's warmth as he rolled up against Kieran during the night. Just thinking about the way his Jaxon's skin felt made Kieran feel warm and tingly all over.

Kieran glanced at Jaxon. He'd rolled over onto his side, facing away from Kieran, but the sheet covering his body had slipped down. Kieran could see how his waist dipped in slightly above slim hips. The fallen sheet also revealed the smooth curve of Jaxon's ass. *Huh? Wasn't Jaxon wearing boxers when he went to bed?* Kieran enjoyed the view in spite of this discrepancy, feeling his cock harden.

Fuck, thought Kieran. He'd already spent more than enough time in the bathroom dealing with inconvenient and embarrassing hard-ons. Jaxon shifted position again, now onto his back. The sheet tangled around his legs, and his cock sprang into view. From across the room Kieran could see Jaxon was hard; his cock dark and heavy, curving slightly along his abs, rising from a dark tangle of hair. Kieran tried not to stare, but lost the battle even before it started. Jaxon

had a cock every bit as gorgeous as the rest of him. Unbidden, Kieran's own cock twitched and ached and called for attention. *Two full days of a swimsuit-clad Jaxon and now this*, Kieran thought.. He felt like one huge 6-foot-4-inch hard-on and he didn't think he could last much longer. Why the fuck had they come to Hawaii? Why couldn't it have been Alaska? Jaxon would have had to keep all of his clothes on there and Kieran wouldn't have needed quite so much self control.

Unable to resist, Kieran palmed himself through his boxers as he got up and headed for the bathroom. On the way he approached Jaxon, intending to pull the covers back up over Jaxon's increasingly irresistible body. As Kieran reached for the sheet, Jaxon grabbed his wrist.

"Kier, why don't you just come to bed?" Jaxon said in a soft voice, making no move to hide his body while Kieran stood hovering over him at the bedside. "Instead of jerking off in the bathroom."

Fuck. Well, Kieran hadn't said he'd been subtle about it. "No, Jax. We had a deal." Kieran nearly choked on the words.

"I think your body wants to make a new deal," Jaxon said with a smirk, staring at the way Kieran's cock tented his boxers. "I want you, Kier. I want you to touch me." Jaxon pushed the sheets away.

"I can't," Kieran said. But he wanted to. With ever fiber of his being. But he wouldn't. No matter how much Jaxon wanted this. Even if Jaxon was ready to take the relationship in a new direction, Kieran wasn't. He cared for Jaxon in a way that wouldn't make it easy for them go their separate ways at

the end of the week. If Kieran gave in now, it would hurt too much to give Jaxon up. And there was no way they could do otherwise: Kieran lived in New York, and Jaxon ran a school in a tiny Texas town that would eat him for breakfast if he showed up with a gay lover.

"Why not? I can see you want me, too."

"Because..." Kieran faltered. He decided to be honest.

"Jax, I'm out of willpower to resist you, and you're making a game out of torturing me. If we start something now, is it just going to end on Sunday? I'm beginning to care entirely too much about you to just say goodbye to you at the airport. If we take things to the next level, it will kill me to let you go."

"Doesn't it matter that I feel the same way? That I'm falling in love with you, too?"

"How can you fall in love when you've only known me a week?" Kieran asked.

"You can fall in love in a week, and I can't? That doesn't make sense."

"But you've never been with a guy. It's a big step for you, especially after everything that's happened with Danetta."

"Someone I know explained it very well: It's not whether it's a guy or a woman, it's who I'm attracted to," Jaxon said, paraphrasing what Kieran had said to him a week earlier. "I happen to be attracted to *you*. I enjoy being with *you*. I want to be with you completely."

Kieran was silent.

"And who says we have to say goodbye on Sunday?" Jaxon continued. "If there's something real here, we'll figure out

how to make it work. But we won't know for sure if we don't take this chance, now." Jaxon pulled Kieran down to sit on the bed beside him, pressing his chest against Kieran's arm. Jaxon leaned in to brush his lips against Kieran's cheek and mouth.

"God, Jax, you are going to kill me, you know?" Kieran let Jaxon pull him into bed so they were lying next to each other. Jaxon took possession of Kieran's mouth in a way that said he was absolutely serious about this.

Kieran let Jaxon kiss him, much the way he had in his hotel room the week before. Jaxon kissed as greedily and passionately as before until Kieran urgently needed air. The hunger in Jaxon's kiss extracted the very core of Kieran, making him feel as though Jaxon desperately needed him in order to stay alive. If this was how Jaxon kissed, Kieran wondered at the intensity with which Jaxon would make love. The prospect thrilled and frightened him.

Their hands explored each other's chests, backs and arms. Touching Jaxon and being touched by him was as amazing as Kieran expected. He hadn't touched Jaxon's cock yet, though he wanted to; but he'd wait and take it slow for Jaxon's sake.

"Can I take your boxers off?" Jaxon asked. Kieran rolled onto his back and lifted his hips as Jaxon slid the shorts down. He got them as far as Kieran's knees and Kieran kicked them off the rest of the way. Kieran was about to find out if Jaxon was really ready for this or not.

Jaxon was on his left side, propped up on one elbow and staring at Kieran's cock with fascination. He started to reach out his hand and stopped.

"Can I touch you—your?" Jaxon whispered.

"You can do whatever you want," Kieran told him. "Touch me however or wherever you want to."

Jaxon looked into Kieran's eyes before slowly reaching his hand out and touching Kieran's cock gently, using his fingertips to trace a line up the shaft. He nearly jumped when Kieran moaned softly at his caress. A few more tentative touches and Jaxon wrapped his hand loosely around Kieran.

"I don't want to do this wrong," Jaxon said.

"It works just like yours, Jax. You're not going to break it," Kieran reassured him.

"What do you like? How do you want me to do it?"

"That would take all the fun out of it, if I gave you the answer before you even started the quiz, wouldn't it?" Kieran joked, lightening the mood enough that Jaxon smiled back.

"Why don't you see if you can figure out what I like?"

Jaxon stroked Kieran, gradually feeling more comfortable and applying more pressure, twisting his hand now and then. If Kieran moaned more loudly Jaxon kept at whatever he was doing. Kieran didn't think he'd seen anything more adorable than the look of concentration on Jaxon's face as he tried to please him.

"I'd like it if you kiss me while you're doing that," Kieran said. Jaxon leaned over and kissed him softly while he continued stroking and pulling at Kieran's cock.

Kieran was so close, but wanted to last. He was defenseless. The feel of Jaxon's mouth on his sent Kieran over the edge. His body shuddered, and he groaned into Jaxon's mouth as a warning, but Jaxon hadn't realized. Kieran came,

shooting hot, thick jets that ended up mostly on Jaxon's chest. The splatter surprised Jaxon, who let go of Kieran's cock and tensed up before he realized what had happened and relaxed.

Jaxon looked over at Kieran, as if hoping for some comment on how he'd done. Kieran didn't say anything. He took Jaxon's hand and brought it to his mouth and lightly kissed the fingers, then gently licked a few drops of come off Jaxon's hand. Jaxon watched with astonishment.

"That's *your*—what does it taste like?" Jaxon asked, his slight disgust turning to curiosity as Kieran kept licking.

"Kind of salty, mainly," Kieran said.

Jaxon didn't say anything. He brought his hand—and Kieran's—up to his mouth and took a tiny lick at one of the cloudy drops. He licked again, but Kieran couldn't read his expression.

"Oh," Jaxon frowned. "It's, uh..."

"It's okay if you don't like it," Kieran said, trying to reassure him. "It takes some getting used to. You don't have to taste it if you don't want to."

"It's not the taste really. It's more—"

"I know," Kieran whispered and kissed Jaxon gently. "Now, I remember a little while ago you asked me to touch you." He leaned in and kissed Jaxon forcefully, pulling his body against his own. Kieran felt Jaxon's cock harden against his hip.

Jaxon lay on his back, drying streaks of come painted along his chest. Kieran was on his side and looked into Jaxon's eyes.

"You still want this?" Kieran asked him.

"Yes."

Kieran rolled toward Jaxon and caressed his chin and neck as they kissed, slowly working his hands down Jaxon's body. He remembered Jaxon's reactions when they kissed the week before in Kieran's hotel room, and bent to lick at one of Jaxon's nipples. The tiny bud hardened in Kieran's mouth. Jaxon moaned and pressed up. Kieran treated the other nipple to the same attention. This time Jaxon didn't ask Kieran to stop.

"Oh, God," Jaxon said as Kieran licked and sucked, his hands moving further down Jaxon's body.

He reached Jaxon's cock. It was hard and beautiful, and Kieran took a moment to appreciate it before reaching out to take hold. He heard the sharp intake of breath as his hand wrapped around the shaft, pleased at Jaxon's reaction. Kieran stroked firmly as his thumb spread pre-come around the crown, rubbing across the slit and drawing more pleasurable noises from Jaxon. Kieran shifted position so he was sitting up and could use both hands. With one he continued the stroking, while the other gently caressed and explored Jaxon's balls with a feather-light touch. Kieran didn't dare go any farther back this first time; that could wait for later. He drew out the experience for Jaxon, who moaned and writhed under Kieran's hands. Every groan and grunt brought pleasure to Kieran. Jaxon groaned and cried out loudly when he came, startling Kieran with the intensity of his orgasm. Kieran's skillful hand captured most of Jaxon's come, and he reached toward the nightstand for some tissues and started to wipe his hand.

"Don't you want to taste me?" Jaxon asked in a slightly disappointed voice, surprising Kieran.

"Yeah, but I thought you didn't like getting messy, so I tried to catch it all," Kieran explained. He brought his hand to his mouth and licked at the remaining drops enjoying the brand new taste of Jaxon.

Jaxon pulled Kieran's hand up to his own mouth and tentatively lapped at drops of his own release.

"It tastes different," he said with amazement. "Is everyone different?"

"I haven't tasted *everyone*," Kieran joked. "But I would suppose so."

"Hmm," Jaxon said thoughtfully. Kieran leaned over and kissed him before getting up and heading into the bathroom. He came back with a warm washcloth and cleaned Jaxon up, then himself, and climbed back into bed.

They lay in each other's arms for several minutes without speaking.

"How are you doing?" Kieran finally asked.

"Fine."

"You don't sound completely fine," Kieran replied, hearing some uneasiness in Jaxon's tone. "Tell me what you're thinking. If this is too much, just let me know."

"It's not that," Jaxon replied. "It's just, is this any different from what you did with the guy in the bathroom at Sam's?" His voice was small and worried.

"Oh, God, yes."

"How? You made each other come and then walked away."

"And I'm not going anywhere right now. I'm still here with you."

"So that's the difference?"

"No. It's so much more than just that. I told you before you could touch me any way you wanted, do anything you wanted. I don't do that with strangers. But I trust you with my body." Kieran stopped, not sure he was explaining this properly. "I'm opening myself up to you, not just my body. I want you to know who I am inside, and I want to know you."

"I guess I understand."

"Are you sorry we did this?"

"No. What you said about trust. It just made me think of Danetta. I thought I could trust her, and—"

"Oh, Jax. I'm sorry!" Kieran said and pulled Jaxon in a tight embrace.

"I think it might be hard for me to trust you at first."

"I understand. Just take things at your own pace. If we do anything you're not sure about, just say the word and we'll stop. We need to both want this or it won't work."

"Okay," Jaxon said. "I can't believe how understanding you are."

"I want you to be comfortable, and I want to make you happy, and I don't just mean in a physical sense. That's easy. You deserve much more than just that. I think Danetta expected you to make *her* happy, but I don't get the impression she was quite as concerned with *your* happiness as she should have been."

"When I step back and look at our relationship, I see you're right. I was so busy worrying about her, I didn't realize she was taking more than she was giving."

"You just tell me what makes you happy, and I'll try my best to do it," Kieran offered. "I don't mean just physically, either."

"Can I look at you some more? Your body, I mean?" Jaxon asked shyly. "I want to see if you have moles anywhere else."

Kieran laughed and lay back, letting Jaxon explore his body with eyes and hands, from the top of his head all the way down to his toes. Then Kieran searched for all of Jaxon's freckles. It was nearly sunrise when they fell asleep in each other's arms.

* * * *

Wednesday

After a very leisurely and sexy room-service breakfast, Kieran and Jaxon hopped in their rental car and drove across the island. They took a tour on horseback of the rainforest, then rode down to a secluded beach for lunch on white sand and snorkeling in a coral reef. The water was crystal clear, and bright with the rainbow colors of fish and other marine wildlife inhabiting the area.

Their evening activity was pre-booked by Danetta, but Jaxon refused to let that stop them from enjoying the Honeymoon Sunset Dinner Sail. They might have been the only same-sex couple on the boat, but acted like honeymooners: holding hands, kissing, and slow dancing. Jaxon actually enjoyed some of the surprised glances they

got, and even made up an elaborate story of their wedding when someone asked about it during dinner. It bore absolutely no resemblance to Jaxon's disastrous wedding only days earlier. Kieran found it hilarious that some of the women seemed hooked on every word Jaxon uttered. His good looks and charm were clearly attracting even women on their honeymoons, sitting next to their new husbands.

It made Kieran wonder if maybe all of this was a dream. Had it really only been ten days earlier that he'd met Jaxon, a straight guy about to be married, and now, here they were, "honeymooning" in Hawaii and beginning a sexual and emotional relationship? Maybe that psychic had been right about him finding his soulmate in a way that was a total surprise to both of them. Kieran didn't know when he'd been this happy before, and wished the week would never end.

Back in the room, Kieran explained he had to finish his column and e-mail it to Jeff by midnight. With the time difference, Jeff would get it first thing in the morning and e-mail Kieran with any additional instructions. Jaxon made quite a distraction, but finally Kieran finished. Jaxon couldn't wait to get him into bed so Kieran could teach him all about blow jobs. Jaxon was an avid student, and a very quick learner, Kieran thought happily as they slipped into sleep, several orgasms later.

* * * *

Friday

Kieran and Jaxon took a day trip by air to the big island of Hawaii to visit the volcanoes, and were exhausted by the time

they got back to Kauai. They had a relaxing dinner at a well-known restaurant specializing in local fish. Kieran ordered a bottle of wine with their meal, which made Jaxon hornier than he already was. Throughout dinner he repeatedly urged Kieran to return to their room, and stroked Kieran's cock through his pants. *Discretion is not Jaxon's strong suit*, Kieran mused.

"Jax, you probably don't want to get arrested for lewd behavior," Kieran said. "It might cause some problems with the school board."

"Can I get arrested for this?" Jaxon asked, his hand on Kieran's crotch.

"Yes," Kieran lied. "Especially in Hawaii. They have all sorts of laws you wouldn't even expect."

"I don't believe you," Jaxon said defiantly, hand still on Kieran.

"Fine. But if I happen to be right, you'll be in a whole heap of trouble back home." Kieran picked up Jaxon's hand and put it back in his own lap.

"Maybe," Jaxon admitted, and behaved himself until they had nearly finished their meal. As Jaxon finished the last few sips of wine in his glass, he very deliberately poured it onto Kieran's crotch and smiled triumphantly. "Oh, let me just help you clean that up!" Kieran sat wide-eyed as Jaxon dabbed at him much more vigorously than was needed to clean up the spill.

"You're just lucky we were drinking white," Kieran said, earning an innocent look from Jaxon.

Back in the room, Jaxon was all over Kieran again as Kieran sat on the couch pretending to be focused on flipping through channels on the television.

"Kier, I think we should do it tonight."

"Do what?" Kieran asked though he knew perfectly well what Jaxon was talking about.

"Real sex."

"Have we been having fake sex so far?" Kieran asked. "Were those fake orgasms, too? You have a spectacular career ahead of you in porn if you were faking all of that."

"You know what I mean," Jaxon said.

"You're sure? You think you're really ready for that?" Kieran asked.

"Well, I liked what we did last night."

"Trust me, Jax. Fingers and cocks are entirely different. You may think the principle is the same, but when someone's cock is up someone else's ass, it's a whole new ball game."

"I *really* liked the fingers," Jaxon said, as if Kieran could possibly have forgotten.

The previous night, Kieran had used his finger inside of Jaxon, stretching him very gently and exploring his prostate so Jaxon could get an idea of how it felt. Then they reversed roles. Once Jaxon got over his initial squeamishness about putting a finger inside of Kieran's ass, he was like a kid with a new toy. The new toy being Kieran's prostate. Jaxon was thrilled to discover that if he kept rubbing it, he could make Kieran come over and over.

"We can try 'real sex' if you're sure. Just remember, we can stop at anytime."

"I won't want to stop."

Despite Jaxon's protestations, Kieran was fairly certain he might have second thoughts once they got down to it. He feared Jaxon was rushing into this whole thing as a way of avoiding his feelings surrounding his fallout with Danetta. Kieran's feelings for Jaxon had grown too strong for him to enjoy this as a purely sexual fling. From the moment he climbed into bed at Jaxon's insistence Tuesday night, Kieran had let go, freed himself to fall in love with Jaxon, and he'd fallen hard. Now he was terrified by the possibility of Jaxon suddenly changing his mind.

* * * *

They were in bed, kissing and caressing, breath already ragged, and both hard, their cocks brushing together and eliciting gasps and moans from both of them. A fresh bottle of lube and a few condoms were on the night table.

"Do you want to top or bottom?" Kieran asked.

"I want to do both," Jaxon said. "I want to try everything."

"Well, aren't you the eager one? You can only do one at a time, so choose wisely."

"What do you think?" Jaxon asked.

"If I top then you can get an idea of how to do the prep. Then so when you top, you'll know how to get me ready. But it's also a big step for you to take, and you can't go back and undo it if you have any doubts about your sexual orientation."

"And if I top?"

"Then you just need to be really careful getting me ready. Most of the mechanics are like being with a girl, except for

the angles; and the fact that I do have a cock down there. You already know where my prostate is, so you can figure out how to hit that spot."

"I want to top," Jaxon said decisively. "I want to make you come like I did last night, with my cock and not my fingers. I liked all the noise you made." That surprised Kieran, but he was touched that Jaxon's thought was to please him and not simply please himself or try out something new for the experience.

Kieran talked Jaxon through the prep. Jaxon slipped a condom on and slicked lube on himself. He looked down at Kieran and smiled. A look of determination crossed Jaxon's face. He touched the tip of his cock to Kieran's entrance and pressed very slowly. A look of astonishment took over as Jaxon pushed himself in, feeling Kieran around him, pressing and gripping.

"Oh, god, Kier. It's so tight. Hot and tight," Jaxon blurted, overwhelmed by the new sensations. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No, just keep going like that," Kieran moaned. "All the way in if you want." Jaxon pushed in deep. "God, Jax, it feels great."

"Oh, fuck, ah." Jaxon was unable to form words as his cock was buried to the hilt inside Kieran. Jaxon's balls tickled Kieran's ass. "It's so good. I'm afraid to move or I think I'll come."

"Just take a few breaths and calm down, then try moving," Kieran suggested. He was enjoying the series of expressions flashing across Jaxon's features as he felt new sensations and

tried new movements and angles. It didn't take Jaxon long to figure out how to brush Kieran's prostate, which reduced him to grunts and groans, much to Jaxon's delight.

"Do I make you come first?" Jaxon asked.

"Yeah," Kieran gasped, very close to the edge. He grabbed his cock and stroked in time with Jaxon's thrusts. Kieran came noisily, his body shuddering and spasming.

"Oh, god Kier! I can feel you squeezing me. Oh, wow." Jaxon sped up his movements, losing the rhythm as his orgasm overtook him. Kieran watched Jaxon's eyes flash green-black as he came, gasping and falling onto Kieran's come-streaked body.

"That was incredible," Jaxon said when he caught his breath again.

"Yeah, it was," Kieran agreed, his voice low and raspy. He rarely bottomed, and he certainly had never been made love to as carefully, eagerly and honestly as Jaxon just had. Kieran enjoyed watching Jaxon's discoveries as much as he enjoyed the physical pleasure Jaxon had given him.

"I loved watching your face and listening when I moved different ways," Jaxon said. "And the way you scrunched up your face just before you came. It was hot the way you grabbed your cock like that and..." Jaxon stopped, realizing he was rambling.

"Is there anything you didn't think was hot about it?" Kieran asked with a grin. He was relieved to see Jaxon enjoyed his first experience.

"No. Except I think I'm gonna fall asleep," Jaxon said, slowly pulling out of Kieran and tossing the condom in a trash

can next to the bed. He lay back down, wrapped his arms around Kieran, and—true to his word—fell sound asleep. Kieran listened to Jaxon's even breathing against his ear for a while, enjoying the warmth and the now-familiar smell of him.

Jaxon had come into Kieran's life and turned everything upside down, it seemed. Suddenly it was the most natural thing in the world to open up his heart and his body to Jaxon, in a way he never had with anyone else. And it was so easy to spend time with Jaxon, to fall in love with every little thing about him, but it frightened Kieran

For now, everything between them was perfect. They could worry later about what would happen when the fantasy world of Kauai was behind them; when they were back in the real worlds, so far apart and very different.

Kieran woke during the night to discover Jaxon spooned tightly behind him, mouth hot and greedy, sucking at Kieran's ear and the back of his neck. Kieran was instantly hard as he felt Jaxon's cock against his lower back. He turned his head toward Jaxon and their mouths met for a long, deep kiss.

"Kier," Jaxon whispered, "I want you again. Can we..."

"Yeah, me too," Kieran said; he loved the way Jaxon asked so sweetly. He shifted position so he was on his stomach, facing the mirror on the wall opposite their bed, and pulled a pillow under his hips. Jaxon flipped the bedside lamp on and reached for the bottle of lube. When Kieran was ready, Jaxon slipped on a condom. He crouched between Kieran's legs and looked down at Kieran, spread open and waiting for him.

Kieran watched his face in the mirror. Jaxon hadn't seen things from this exact angle before and Kieran could tell from

the expression on his face that he'd realized how vulnerable Kieran was like this. The sensation gave Jaxon an obvious rush. He slipped quickly and smoothly into Kieran, clearly enjoying the tight, hot grip once again. Jaxon watched himself in the mirror, catching Kieran's gaze.

Jaxon was slightly more aggressive and rougher this time. Kieran loved it: the way Jaxon occasionally grabbed onto his hips as he slammed his cock deep into Kieran; the sounds Jaxon couldn't control as he groaned and grunted with each stroke. There was tenderness, too: a shared look that told Kieran that this was about so much more than sex right now for Jaxon, too. Jaxon's hands caressed Kieran's body; and he whispered endearments into Kieran's ear as Jaxon's teeth grazed Kieran's neck and shoulders. After they both came, Jaxon didn't fall asleep. He held onto Kieran for dear life, and they kissed for a long time, until they both slept.

* * * *

Saturday

Kieran and Jaxon got up relatively early and had breakfast on the nearly deserted beach before spending the rest of the morning hiking in Waimea Canyon. By early afternoon it was too cloudy to enjoy the scenery, and they headed back to the beach at their hotel. Kieran dared Jaxon to sign up for a surfing lesson. Two hours later, they'd learned the basics and Jaxon had actually stood up and caught a wave.

It was their final day in Hawaii, last day of peace and tranquility and being alone together before they would need to face their real lives and problems again. Kieran and Jaxon

spent their last sunset walking along the beach, holding hands in silence.

* * * *

Neither of them had much appetite at dinner. The unspoken anxiety around their inevitable goodbyes was tangible. Kieran and Jaxon went back to their room and discovered a room service cart with champagne—a farewell gift from the hotel. Kieran popped the cork and had a glass each.

"Let's go down to the beach for a one last swim," Jaxon suggested.

"Now?" Kieran asked. "It's late."

"No one else is down there now. It'll be romantic. Besides, I want to taste the salt on your skin after you've been in the ocean."

"I can't argue when you put it like that."

On the beach, they chased each other through the shallow surf, letting themselves be caught too easily, then kissed in waist-deep water as gentle waves splashed over them. When they were too hungry for each other to continue on the beach, they made their way back to their room and shrugged off their hotel robes and stood, arms around each other, kissing deeply. Jaxon wrapped his hands around Kieran's cock, which threatened to rip through the thin fabric of his swim trunks. Kieran had already gotten Jaxon's trunks off and ran his hands over the curve of his ass.

"Kier, tonight," Jaxon had trouble getting the words out between kisses. "Tonight, I want you to make love to me. I want to bottom."

Kieran let go of Jaxon's lower lip.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I want to feel you inside me."

"Jax, *I'm* not sure—"

"Don't you want me?"

"God, yes, of course I do. Just, it's a big step for you."

"There is something here between us, right?" Kieran nodded. "Something that's big enough to last past this trip. To become serious, right?"

"Yes," Kieran assured Jaxon. "Absolutely. I was going to wait until later to bring it up, but I want you to come to New York for your summer break. Spend as long as you can with me while you decide what to do about your job in Buckwheat Springs. Maybe you can even look around for a new job in New York while you're up there."

"Then, it can't possibly be the wrong thing for us ... tonight."

"You'll come to New York?" Kieran asked, excited at the chance of having Jaxon visiting him.

"Only if you make love to me tonight. Otherwise, no deal." Jaxon curled his mouth into a mischievous grin.

Jaxon lay on his back as Kieran kissed him, hands and mouth eventually traveling down Jaxon's throat. Kieran licking at the salt on his skin, and sucked at his neck and collarbone.

He traveled to Jaxon's chest and nipples next. Kieran had never met anyone with such sensitive nipples and he enjoyed

giving them proper attention while Jaxon squirmed and moaned beneath him. Moving farther down, Kieran finally reached Jaxon's cock; on which he lavished even more loving attention as he used one hand to get Jaxon ready. Kieran took his time, gently stretching and opening Jaxon so as to cause him the minimum amount of pain.

"You okay?" Kieran asked.

"Um, I think so."

"Okay. Ready?" Kieran rolled on a condom and applied liberal amounts of lube. He knelt between Jaxon's knees.

"Are you sure it's going to fit?" Jaxon asked, looking at Kieran's cock.

"I'm positive it will fit," Kieran said.

"I'm kinda scared now," Jaxon admitted.

"I know, but it's me, okay? I'm going to take good care of you. I want to make it really good, and it will be. Just try to relax."

"I trust you." To Kieran those words meant everything.

"We can stop if you want," Kieran offered.

"No! I want this. I really want you."

Kieran pressed the tip of his cock to Jaxon's hole. With one hand, he took Jaxon's cock started stroking. Kieran waited until Jaxon relaxed and moaned a little at the touch before pressing inside just a tiny bit. Jaxon didn't react, so Kieran pushed in a bit more. This time Jaxon's eyebrows went up.

"Keep watching my face, Jax, and relax," Kieran whispered.

Kieran slid in as slowly as possible, feeling the incredible pressure increasing around him. He longed to drive himself

into the heat, but didn't give in to the instinct. Jaxon saw the expression of immense pleasure on Kieran's face and relaxed. Kieran found he could slide in more easily. Then Jaxon's breath caught and Kieran stopped.

"You okay, Jax?"

"Yeah, I feel so full. It's good, and I can see how great it feels for you."

"You—you feel so good, Jax," Kieran told him, watching Jaxon's expression carefully as Kieran pushed in again. Jaxon smiled. Kieran leaned down to kiss him and slid in completely, then wrapped his arms around Jaxon and waited for him to relax and get used to the feeling of Kieran's cock inside of him.

"I feel like—I can't explain it, but like something was missing, and now, like this, everything's perfect," Jaxon whispered. Kieran marveled again at how Jaxon felt and expressed his emotions so intensely. No other lover had ever said anything as beautiful to Kieran.

"Yeah, *perfect*," Kieran repeated softly. "Let me know when you're ready for me to start moving."

"You're completely in? It didn't really hurt as much as I thought it would, except a little bit at first," Jaxon said, wide-eyed and as relieved as he was surprised.

"I told you I was going to take care of you."

"You did," Jaxon said with a smile. "Okay, go ahead now."

Kieran looked into Jaxon's eyes, seeing a mirror of his own emotions, a mix of arousal, fascination, affection and a hint of fear—of a new experience, or in Kieran's case the acceptance that he had fallen immensely and deeply in love with Jaxon.

He'd never been with someone who he'd cared so much for. He'd also never been anyone's first, and took that very seriously. He was determined to make this the most amazing experience Jaxon had ever had.

"Now wrap your legs around me, Jax."

Kieran started with a slow rhythm until he could see—and hear—that Jaxon was obviously enjoying the experience. Taking hold of Jaxon's hips, Kieran carefully shifted him to change angles and find what Jaxon liked best, occasionally brushing against Jaxon's prostate. Jaxon's eyes were half-closed. His hands skimmed over Kieran's shoulders and torso. When Jaxon's hand moved to take hold of his cock, Kieran gently deflected it.

"Jax, we're not nearly finished here, unless you want me to stop," Kieran told him. "Or do you want more?"

"Oh God, yeah, more," Jaxon gasped and writhed on Kieran's cock. Kieran was pleased that see Jaxon couldn't form a sentence. Looking down, he saw Jaxon already looked fucked out—head thrown back, eyes half-closed, mouth open—and knowing he'd make Jaxon feel that good was a thrill in itself. Already, Kieran knew he'd never felt anything as extraordinary as this. Being inside of Jaxon was even more incredible than he'd imagined; and it wasn't just the sheer physical pleasure of Jaxon's incredibly tight heat.

Almost from the instant he began moving inside of Jaxon, Kieran held back his own orgasm. Now he'd reached his limit. He gently took hold of Jaxon's cock, stroking him skillfully, thumb spreading the now-heavy stream of pre-come around the crown and squeezing along the shaft as he used his

thumb on the sensitive bundle of nerves under the head. He heard Jaxon's breath hitch at the touch and watched Jaxon struggle to open his eyes, teeth digging into his full lower lip. Kieran focused on dragging his own cock against Jaxon's prostate as he stroked until Jaxon came. The orgasm nearly surprised him, eyes open, glittering green, as thick, hot jets of creamy come shot across his chest.

"Oh, Kier. Oh God, fuck," was about all Jaxon could manage to say.

Kieran leaned down onto Jaxon's chest, feeling the hot slickness of come and Jaxon's heaving chest as he fought for breath, body still shuddering from the intensity of his orgasm. Jaxon's hands came up and tangled in Kieran's hair, locking Kieran down, pulling him tightly against Jaxon's body.

"Oh, Kier," Jaxon said, and gave up trying to speak.

Kieran covered Jaxon's mouth with his own and kissed him through the final aftershocks of orgasm, reveling in the feeling of the tight spasms squeezing his cock and Jaxon's arms and legs locking him down. When Jaxon lay quiet with his hands still in Kieran's hair, a few quick, shallow thrusts were all Kieran needed and he was coming, with Jaxon's name tumbling from his lips. He held Jaxon tightly, shuddering and groaning as he spurted his release inside of Jaxon, filling the condom.

Jaxon stroked Kieran's hair until Kieran's body stilled and he opened his eyes.

"That was the most amazing thing I've ever felt in my entire life," Jaxon said, still slightly breathless, his voice low and gravelly.

"Me too," Kieran said. "Oh, I must be crushing you," he added when he realized all of his weight was on Jaxon.

"No, I like it," Jaxon told him. "It feels nice having you on me, and in me." He pulled Kieran's head down again for another kiss.

"It feels amazing," Kieran agreed.

"Is it always like that?"

"No."

"Oh," Jaxon replied, disappointed.

"It gets better," Kieran replied with a huge grin.

"I think I'd die if I felt anything better than that. I thought I was dying *this* time."

"Well, it's your loss if you don't want to try again."

"I didn't say that," Jaxon laughed.

Kieran slipped out of Jaxon and took care of the condom before lying down next to him again.

"Let me go get something to clean up," Kieran said, and headed into the bathroom. He returned with a damp cloth and cleaned them both up before sliding under the sheets again with Jaxon.

"You're serious about what you said before? You want me to go to New York for the summer?" Jaxon still seemed surprised at Kieran's suggestion.

"Unless you have something else you were planning. I have a feeling that trying to get together on weekends somewhere is going to get old real fast, and it won't be enough. We'll want more time together. This seems like the perfect opportunity to find out whether this is going to work long-term between us."

"I feel so comfortable with you, like we've known each other longer than only a couple of weeks," Jaxon said.

"I know what you mean. But this past week has all been so unreal, especially after what happened with Danetta and you left in the middle of your wedding. We need to spend time together in more normal circumstances."

"You have room for me in your place?"

"Yeah, of course. I don't live in a crappy little fifth-floor walk-up studio apartment. I have a nice place, in SoHo," Kieran said. "The magazine pays me a lot to be such an asshole in my columns."

"Sounds like you're a little disillusioned with your job?"

"It's not as easy to write bitchy condescending columns as it used to be. I've been trying to branch out a bit, but my editor hasn't liked anything I've written that wasn't snarky and sardonic."

"You could move to Texas with me?"

"Right. You think we could live together in Buckwheat Springs?" Kieran asked with an ironic laugh. "Being a gay couple in a little town in Texas sounds like a barrel of laughs to me."

"Good point," Jaxon admitted, then yawned. He looked over at Kieran with an embarrassed smile.

"I think it's bedtime," Kieran said, and turned off the lamp on the bedside table. He pulled Jaxon into his arms.

"Hey, Kier?" Jaxon asked after several moments of silence.

"Hm?" Kieran asked sleepily.

"So when are you going to show me 'better?'"

"My God, you're insatiable," Kieran laughed, wondering if Jaxon had been like this with Danetta. He fought off the urge to ask. "Think you can wait till the morning? I'd expect you might be a bit sore now anyway."

"Yeah, a little, but in a good way."

"Good night, Jax."

"Good night."

"I love you," Kieran whispered a few minutes later after working up the courage. Jaxon was already asleep. Kieran just listened to the sound of the other man's breathing, regular and comforting, his body pressed tightly against Kieran. A faint scent of salt water still clung to Jaxon's skin, blending with the musky smell of sex that permeated the room. The day had been perfect; and Kieran thought, as he drifted off to sleep, that any day starting and ending with Jaxon would be.

* * * *

Sunday

Jaxon made sure they got up early enough to learn "better" from Kieran. He decided Kieran was absolutely right, but then he had been about everything they'd done together in bed. Afterwards, they rushed to pack and have a quick breakfast before check out. While waiting for the airport shuttle, Kieran and Jaxon looked around in the hotel's gift shop. They decided against picking up some souvenirs, preferring to keep their week together more private and personal.

"Hang on," Jaxon said as they walked out of the shop, "There's actually something I do want to get. Wait here." He darted back into the store, leaving Kieran with the suitcases at the edge of the lobby. He was back in two minutes carrying a small bag. Kieran was more than curious what he had gone to buy.

"This is for you," Jaxon said, opening the bag and producing a bright pink plastic orchid key ring.

"Wow! How did you know I wanted one of those?" Kieran teased, holding out his hand as if Jaxon was going to put the ring on his finger.

"It's for your suitcase," Jaxon said, attaching the key ring to Kieran's bag. "It's black and looks like 98 percent of the other bags out there. Now you can find it easily even at the airport in New York."

"O-kay, random," Kieran replied. "But, thanks." He gave Jaxon a kiss—just a brush of lips against a morning-stubbed cheek. "Now my suitcase looks gay, too. I'm guessing that's why you didn't get matching flowers for us?"

"Yeah, it's tough to be a gay suitcase in Texas, too."

"Oh, looks like the airport shuttle is here already," Kieran said as he noticed a group of people with suitcases rushing toward the exit. Kieran and Jaxon followed slowly, wheeling their suitcases behind them, reluctant for their magical week to be over.

* * * *

The original plan when Kieran and Jaxon left Texas the weekend before was for Jaxon to return to Texas Sunday, and

for Kieran to fly back to New York. Those plans had been long since abandoned, Kieran would return with Jaxon to Buckwheat Springs for a few days; ostensibly to follow up on the fallout from the disastrous wedding for another column. No one in town would know the real reason he was there, and it would give them a few more days together.

There was a stopover in Los Angeles for two hours. After buying the largest coffees available at the first coffee cart they encountered, they wandered around the airport killing time.

"Kier, there's a newsstand over there," Jaxon said, pointing. "I can't wait to read your column." He pulled on Kieran's arm.

"Sure, Jax, if you want to." Kieran had long ago gotten over the excitement of seeing his words in print. Jaxon quickly found *Gloss* on a rack and paid for it, then led Kieran over to a bench next to an enormous potted palm tree so he could start reading. Kieran put his laptop case on the floor between his feet and put his arm around Jaxon, leaning on the back of the bench. There was something different, almost frightening, about having someone he knew reading his work. It was much more personal and revealing than when thousands of complete strangers read it.

Kieran felt Jaxon tense up. "Jax? That bad, is it?" Kieran joked.

"I wouldn't exactly say it's 'bad,'" Jaxon replied, his voice tight. "You have a really engaging style. And I guess it's very well-written, and amusing. Like this line: 'At first meeting

Jaxon, I came to the conclusion that his IQ barely exceeded his waist size."

Kieran's heart pounded in his chest as a sickening feeling built in his gut. That wasn't in his final story; it had been edited out of the first draft. He tried to grab the magazine away from Jaxon, but Jaxon wouldn't let go.

"I wasn't quite sure whether Danetta was actually a witch or simply a highly skilled puppeteer. At dinner when Jaxon spoke, I couldn't even see Danetta's lips moving. A very impressive performance." Jaxon read. "Should I go on?"

"That's wrong! That's not the story I submitted!" Kieran shouted, loudly enough to attract the attention of passers-by who eyed them suspiciously and moved to the other side of the terminal to avoid them.

"Oh, really? Then who wrote it? It has your name here at the top of the page, and a little photo of you," Jaxon said in a snide tone, tapping his finger almost violently on the photograph.

"It was, I..." Kieran gave up. He didn't know how this had happened, but he was going to kill Jeff when he got back to the office, as slowly and painfully as possible. He'd research torture methods before he decided on one. Jeff had approved the final story Kieran e-mailed a few days earlier, and never once hinted that he'd make any changes.

"I'm still waiting for your explanation, if you have one," Jaxon said, glaring at Kieran, who did his best to avoid Jaxon's angry gaze. "Just tell me, did you write any of this?"

"It was in the very first draft, before I—we—anything happened between us." Kieran took the magazine from Jaxon

and skimmed the page. Everything he'd wanted to delete had been reinserted: the part about the "X" in Jaxon's name, the Stepford comments, the matching shirt and skirt they wore when Kieran met Danetta and Jaxon. Kieran felt his world come apart and he didn't have a clue how to put it back together. "It was the first draft I sent to my editor, but I told him to ignore it and delete the files." The excuse sounded so pathetic, even Kieran hardly believed it.

"So you *did* write this? Even if you didn't submit it as part of your final story, these are your ideas and your words?"

"Yes," Kieran admitted in a tiny voice, utterly defeated.

"Is this really what you think of me?" Jaxon grabbed the magazine back and stared at it.

"No, of course not!" Kieran shot back. "You know how I feel about you. Hasn't that been completely clear this past week? I love you," he said quietly. Jaxon scoffed and looked away, ignoring the words.

"But you must have thought these things at some point, or you wouldn't have written them."

"Yes. No. That's not how I write. I don't really think half the crap I write, I just take my impressions and exaggerate them. It's hyperbole, right? Just a form of—"

"I know what hyperbole is. I'm a fucking high school principal!" More people turned to stare.

"I'm just explaining the style of humor I use. It's why my column is popular. People like—"

"People like to laugh at other people's problems or misfortune or confusion? Is that what you're going to say? People like to criticize others so they can forget how fucked

up their own lives are? What *people* like is not the issue here. The issue is how could you have written these things, taken my emotions and thoughts about Danetta and about love and marriage, and used those personal feelings to ridicule me—especially after what you found out, about how she'd lied..." Jaxon's voice trailed off.

"You know that's not what I wrote this past week and submitted. And I never would have ridiculed your idea of love or how happy you thought you would be with her. Never. That's all too raw and personal right now. Besides, I never intended for *this* to be published."

"You mean you didn't think I'd ever see what you originally wrote?"

"That's not exactly what I meant, but I guess it's true enough," Kieran said. He didn't have the strength to argue. It was hard enough to keep breathing without gasping. Jaxon was right. Trying to make excuses wouldn't fix anything or stop the pain Kieran caused.

"This doesn't just make me look ridiculous to my family and friends, but to my students, their parents, the school board, and anyone I might come into professional contact with. Do you see what you've done here? All in the name of entertainment and selling magazines! But that isn't even the worst. Kier, I can't help but see this as a betrayal of all of the feelings I've shared with you this week. I shared my entire self, body and soul with you. I can't believe I let myself be taken in by someone who thinks so little of me."

"Oh, God, Jax. I'm so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you like this! I don't think those things, and I never wanted any of

that to be published. When I wrote this I didn't realize I was falling in love with you. If I really thought this way about you, how *could* I fall in love with you?"

"Maybe you don't really love me," Jaxon said callously. "Maybe you just saw me as a challenge to get me into your bed."

"Do you really think that?" Kieran asked.

"What I think is that I never want to see or talk to you again. Go get on a plane back to New York and leave me alone. I can't take any more lies and deceit. After everything that happened with Danetta, now I find out that you're no better than she is. Goodbye, Kieran," Jaxon said, his voice cold and cruel.

Jaxon got up to walk away and realized he was still holding the magazine. He turned and threw it at Kieran, hitting him in the face. Kieran sat on the bench in the middle of the airport, crumpled magazine by his side, and watched Jaxon Lang walk out of his life. He had never felt so miserable. As wretched as Kieran felt right now about losing Jaxon, he felt even worse that he'd hurt him. Kieran had found out about Danetta's deceit and manipulations and saved Jaxon from a marriage built on lies, only to break him again with more lies. It killed Kieran that he had been the one to shatter Jaxon's happiness again.

Kieran looked in the direction Jaxon had gone. It would be easy to find him and catch up to apologize. But Kieran knew Jaxon wouldn't listen right now. Kieran realized that in the same way his wit and humor had gotten him ahead in

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

journalism, it had just destroyed his chance at earning Jaxon's love.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

Jaxon had wanted to do so much more than just throw the magazine at Kieran and walk away. *Ironic*, he thought, realizing he probably felt the same way Danetta had when she attacked Kieran with her wedding bouquet. Kieran Quinn had burst into their lives two weeks ago, and in that short span of time had managed to do more damage than a hurricane. Jaxon couldn't believe what a fool he'd been to fall for the man. He listened to Kieran talk about love and sex and attraction, and somehow all along Kieran had been spinning a web of lies that in many ways was worse than what Danetta did. Jaxon couldn't forgive her lies, but Kieran's duplicity and *hypocrisy* hurt even more.

The flight home took forever. The empty seat next to Jaxon was a constant reminder Kieran was gone. He dreaded his return to Buckwheat Springs, where every single person in town would have surely read the column. The only saving grace was that no one knew that for the past week Jaxon shared his bed and body with Kieran: a week full of beautiful memories he couldn't bear to think about.

Jaxon headed straight for the baggage claim in Amarillo, retrieved his suitcase, and sat down to wait for Sam to pick him up. He thought long and hard before calling her from Los Angeles, but needed a ride back to town and knew she wouldn't ask too many questions. He wasn't up to spending any time with Mike or Jordan, and couldn't ask Tom—not with Jamie about to have their baby any time now. Sam had been

the logical choice, though she was running late. The rest of the passengers from Jaxon's flight collected their bags and departed. One bag remained on the belt, going round and round: Kieran's suitcase. It had the pink plastic orchid Jaxon had attached to it in the hotel lobby just before they left for the airport. Jaxon felt sick to his stomach.

Sam entered the baggage claim area and Jaxon walked over to meet her. She gave him a warm embrace and apologized for being late. As they walked out of the airport, Jaxon looked back and saw an airport employee pull Kieran's suitcase off the conveyor belt.

"Well, Jaxon, honey, I can't wait to hear all about your trip!" Sam said as they walked to her pickup.

"I'm really tired, Sam. I'm not feeling much like talking now if that's okay with you," Jaxon told her.

"Sure, honey. Long day of traveling can really take it out of you. I know it probably wasn't really a vacation for you, dealing with everything that's happened."

They drove in silence for a few minutes until they'd gotten out of town and onto the nearly deserted state road heading for Buckwheat Springs. Sam concentrated on the road while Jaxon stared out the window listlessly. It was pitch black outside except for the headlights on Sam's truck, the stars, and a tiny sliver of moon.

"You want to talk about anything, sweetie?" Sam ventured.

"No," he replied quietly.

"Well, just in case you change your mind, I'm right over here." Sam gave his leg a reassuring squeeze. "And I'm real good at keeping secrets."

"I know."

"Well, you know, you look good. All tanned and healthy and—"

Jaxon's head whipped around and he glared at Sam until she stopped talking.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't realize *I* wasn't allowed to talk either." Sam turned the radio on, flipping around the stations and settling on a lively Mexican station.

They drove for another five minutes before Jaxon couldn't take it any more and reached out to the radio, twisting the dial violently until he found another station to listen to.

"Well, at least now I know there's really someone home inside that gorgeous bod over there," Sam remarked.

"What the fuck do you want from me?" Jaxon asked heatedly, wishing he'd taken a bus. *Since when did Sam get so chatty?* he wondered.

"I think you need to get yourself together before you go to school tomorrow," she said. "People are going to be talking, maybe even asking you direct questions, and you can't react like that. And *they* might not be asking with your best interests at heart. I'm here to listen if there's anything you want to get off your chest with a friend."

"Thanks," he said, chastened by her tone and offer. "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"No, problem. I know it's all been horrible, and it's going to be rough for a while, after what Danetta—"

"It has nothing to do with Danetta," Jaxon said, not intending to let that slip. He concentrated on the darkness

outside again. Maybe Sam would just pretend she hadn't heard him.

"Oh," was all Sam said, but she pulled the truck over to the shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it anyway?"

Jaxon stared out of his window for a few minutes, avoiding Sam's gaze. It all hurt so much and needed to tell somebody.

"I know it's going to sound crazy," he said, "but I kind of met someone else. Just listen before you start tsk-tsking me, okay? The timing is so fucked up, but in a way it doesn't have anything to do with Danetta. I mean, things were sort of there between us before..." Jaxon's voice trailed off. He didn't know how to explain any of this. He didn't know enough about how he felt about Kieran—much less his own sexuality—to be able to convey it someone else. But he was hurting, and knew Sam wanted to help. "We went to Hawaii together, and it didn't turn out quite the way I had expected."

"Ah," Sam said. "That someone wouldn't happen to be a tall, dark and handsome journalist, now would it?" *How had she known?* he wondered. *Had everyone in town seen something between us?*

"Was it so obvious?" Jaxon asked, looking out the window. He couldn't face her.

"No, I don't think so. But I'm pretty good at picking up on little things."

"Because you're a bartender, and you're good at reading people?"

"No. Because I'm gay," she said matter-of-factly.

Jaxon's head shot around again. "You are?"

"Have you ever seen me with a guy?" she asked. Jaxon shook his head, his expression thoughtful. "I have a girlfriend who lives near Amarillo. But my point is that I can see when two people are attracted to each other, and I definitely saw that between the two of you. I admit I was surprised at first when I saw your reaction to him, but I have to tell you, Kieran looked at you in a way I've never seen Danetta look at you. That boy was in love with you the day he met you; I'd bet a month's salary on that."

"What do you mean?"

"He looked kinda fascinated with you, and not just a physical attraction—though I could tell there was plenty of that, too. Danetta always looks—looked—sorta like she owned you and took you for granted. I don't think she appreciated you very much, but it's not really my place to say."

"No, it's okay," Jaxon said. "I don't mind. But about Kieran. We had such a great time together in Hawaii. It was perfect. Then—did you read his column? The things he said about me?" Jaxon's voice was strained, full of hurt.

"I read it. I can see why you're upset."

"He said that his editor published the first draft and not the one he submitted while we were in Hawaii. I know he didn't intend for that to be published and he was sorry it happened, but it doesn't change the fact he wrote it. I told him I couldn't trust him any more than I could trust Danetta, and left him in the middle of the airport in L.A."

"I can't say whether or not you should believe him or accept his apology," Sam said. "That's for you to decide. But I'm here if you want to talk about how you're feeling. It might

not mean much, but I don't think people really believe all that stuff he writes. They might laugh at his humor, but I doubt anyone has changed their opinion of you after reading the article. Most people just see it as entertainment, like television. It's amusing, but it's not real."

"Thanks. I know you're trying to make me feel better. I'm just not convinced yet." He leaned over and hugged Sam and she got back on the road.

* * * *

Buckwheat Springs

Jaxon expected Buckwheat Springs to be different upon his return. He was convinced a lot of people would still see him as a villain for walking out of his wedding. But he was pleasantly surprised to discover that wasn't the case. While no one went out of their way to tell him, most people were so horrified upon finding out what Danetta had done that they immediately forgave Jaxon. It was clear Danetta used up the goodwill Buckwheat Springs had for her treatment of her former grooms. Jaxon wasn't exactly a returning hero, but people treated him as kindly as they had before the wedding fiasco. Even Kieran's column painting him as a fool hadn't caused much of a stir, since none of it had been Jaxon's fault. But none of this erased the sting of Kieran's words or Jaxon's sense of betrayal.

For two weeks following his return, Jaxon concentrated on his work. He tried to erase lingering traces of Danetta around his house, and memories of his week with Kieran. Jaxon planned to get out of town again once his summer break

began, and use the time to make decisions about his future. He saw no reason to stay in Buckwheat Springs. It was time to move on.

Jaxon's first week back at work was agony. If not for the hectic pace of the school year's final week and the senior class's graduation ceremony, Jaxon knew his misery over what happened with Kieran would be multiplied. Even Sam's observations about how Kieran had been so obviously falling in love with Jaxon weren't enough to erase the pain of discovering his trust in Kieran had been so misplaced.

When Jaxon was unable to sleep and looked over at the empty side of his bed, it wasn't Danetta he missed: it was Kieran. Somehow Kieran had gotten into his very soul in a way that Danetta never had. It wasn't just Jaxon's mind that couldn't get over Kieran. His body wouldn't forget the feel of Kieran's hands on him, or Kieran's kisses. Jaxon couldn't shake the physical memory of making love with Kieran. As amazing as it had been to be inside of him, it couldn't compare to how incredible it felt having Kieran inside him. Jaxon had wanted it so badly at the time, and was still amazed by how tender—and *loving*—Kieran had been. Jaxon wished the experience hadn't been so perfect; he wished it had been painful and ugly, so he could hate Kieran for touching him.

Jaxon lost count of how many times he woke up during the night, his body craving Kieran, his cock painfully hard and demanding attention. He tried to think of someone else as he stroked himself, seeking release that never satisfied him.

His second week home promised to be filled with paperwork, reports, and schedules for the following school year. Jaxon walked to school Monday morning dreading the week ahead. Mid-morning, Jaxon wandered out of his office to refill his mug with fresh coffee, and noticed a group of staff members engaged in a lively discussion. Jaxon thought he heard someone mention Kieran's name. Someone from the group looked up.

"Jaxon, what did you think of Kieran Quinn's column?" the man asked. Jaxon walked over, feigning nonchalance, resigned to the fate of having to discuss the column yet again.

"I'm tired of talking about the whole wedding thing. Isn't there something better to discuss?"

"No, it's not about the wedding," someone else responded. "We're talking about his column yesterday, when he apologized for what he wrote. He's resigned from the magazine. He wrote a really personal column this time. The first and last one, he said."

"What?" Jaxon felt his face flush.

"I have a copy at my desk if you want to read it," one of the teachers offered before running off. She returned a moment later with *Gloss* in hand. Jaxon took the proffered magazine, though he wasn't sure he wanted to read it.

"Thanks," he said, and went back to his office. Jaxon sipped his coffee, staring at the unopened magazine on his desk. *I'll read the column when I finished this mug*, he told himself. Jaxon drank so slowly the coffee turned cold. He frowned and swallowed an unsatisfying mouthful. *Best to just*

get it over with and move on, he decided, and turned to the table of contents to find the column.

When he finished reading, Jaxon was genuinely surprised. Kieran had indeed apologized—not specifically for the wedding column or anything he said about Jaxon, but in general to all the people he ever embarrassed, hurt or betrayed. Kieran said he hadn't realized exactly how much power his words had to harm other people until something he wrote hurt a person who was very important to him. By the time he understood exactly how much pain he caused, he wrote, it was too late. Kieran said he found himself sitting alone in the middle of an airport, unable to find any words to express how sorry was. This would be his last column for *Gloss*; he was resigning, rather than continue what he'd been doing.

That evening Jaxon walked over to Sam's and settled himself at the bar. It was only seven o'clock on a Monday so the place was empty except for the two of them and the jukebox played random selections that no one was listening to. Sam opened a bottle of beer for Jaxon.

"Did you see what he wrote?" Jaxon asked. There was no need to specify who he was talking about.

"Yep, I did." It was impossible to interpret her tone.

"What do you think?"

"I think you couldn't have asked for a more public and sincere apology than that. It's still up to you whether you decide to forgive him or to see what's left of your relationship. But I think he'd have written 'Jaxon Lang, I'm sorry, and I love you' if he could do it without outing you."

"You think so?"

"Honey, I know so," She shut her mouth quickly and Jaxon was immediately suspicious..

"You talked to him!" he said, pointing the beer bottle at her accusingly. "You called him to talk about me?"

"No, he called me here, asking about you," she admitted. "He knew you wouldn't talk to him. But he was real worried about you."

"You told him what we've been talking about? What I told you?" Jaxon asked, not wanting to believe that another person close to him had betrayed him. He wasn't even sure he'd trust his own mother at this point.

"No, of course not! I'm on your side, Sugar. I just said you were pretty upset about what he'd written and that you thought he'd lied and betrayed you just the way Danetta had. That's no more than you told him yourself, right?" Jaxon nodded, his anger waning. "But he did say he was going to find a way to apologize to you even if he couldn't get you back. He said he needed you to know he was genuinely sorry for hurting you so much."

"Does he think I'm just going to accept his apology and take him back? 'Cause I'm not!"

"He knows you can't or won't trust him now, but you shouldn't let that keep you from trusting someone else in the future. I think he's learned his lesson in the worst possible way, but I know he doesn't expect anything from you."

"Well good. I don't have anything left for him anymore." Jaxon took a long swig of beer to keep Sam from seeing the tear sliding down his cheek.

* * * *

Lying in bed that night, Jaxon thought about how Kieran behaved while they were in Hawaii. Kieran made it clear to Jaxon before they left Buckwheat Springs—and before Jaxon left Danetta—that he was very interested in Jaxon beyond simple physical attraction. And during their trip together, *Kieran* had been the one to try to slow things down physically. He forced Jaxon to wait and make sure he was completely ready emotionally and physically to go beyond kissing. *Could Kieran really have fallen in love with me?* Jaxon wondered. *Is he really as remorseful as he said in his column?*

The more Jaxon went over their conversations in his head, the more convinced he was that he'd been too hard on Kieran. Jaxon couldn't stop his feelings for the other man; he'd just been trying to cover them up with work and anger. Meanwhile, he hadn't missed Danetta for a second since he'd run out of the church.

Unable to sleep, Jaxon called Directory Assistance in New York for Kieran's phone number. It was unlisted. He'd have to wait until the following day and try the magazine's office and see if they had home contact information. Excited by his decision, Jaxon found sleep impossible.

There was no luck with the magazine the following morning. They confirmed that Kieran did not work there anymore, but refused to release personal information about him. *I could send a letter.* Would the magazine forward his mail? That seemed to be the only option at this point, but

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

Jaxon didn't know what to say. *Call me? I love you? I forgive you?*

Jaxon called Sam at the saloon to see if she had Kieran's number. She said she didn't, but promised to get it if he called again. Jaxon hung up feeling hopeless. All he knew was that Kieran's apartment was in SoHo; he didn't even have a clue what street it was on.

* * * *

The following Monday was scheduled to be the last administrative work day. Jaxon booked a flight to New York, determined to get there and find Kieran. The rest of the week flew by in a flurry of work, but the weekend dragged on and on. Finally, Monday arrived. Jaxon followed up with the school board on all his reports, and declared the official end to the school year. That evening Sam took Jaxon with her to her girlfriend's house, where he would spend the night before Sam dropped him at the airport first thing Tuesday morning. Jaxon was on his way to New York at last.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

Tuesday

New York City

Jaxon took a taxi from the airport directly to the *Gloss* offices in Manhattan. Even though Kieran had quit, it was the only place Jaxon could think of to begin his search.

The cab dropped him off in front of the office. He looked up at the tall buildings surrounding him, blocking out the afternoon sun. Jaxon felt a chill go through him. *What if Kieran already moved on?* he worried. Jaxon shook his head. *No time for doubt*, he told himself.

Jaxon checked the building's directory and rode an elevator to the 25th floor. *Gloss'* reception area was plush and impressive, decorated in creams and tans—they probably called it biscuit and eggshell—with inscrutable modern art on the walls. Jaxon walked up to the receptionist, who was seated behind the large maple desk. She had sleek, shoulder-length black hair and long, red fingernails like talons she was in the middle of painting.

"I'm looking for Kieran Quinn," he said in a friendly tone.

"Kieran Quinn is no longer on the staff of this magazine," she said in a formal, rote voice, barely looking up. Her attention was focused on the pinky finger of her left hand.

"I know that," Jaxon ventured. "I'm a friend of his, and I'm in New York on short notice. I didn't bring his home address with me." He gazed down at her with sparkling green eyes.

No dice. Even his slight Texas accent didn't melt this ice maiden.

"You're his friend, and you don't have his address?" she asked suspiciously, squinting at him.

"Right, this was a last-minute trip. I left my address book at home in Texas," Jaxon tried to lie, but he wasn't very good at it.

"Texas?" she asked. This seemed to have caught her attention.

"Yeah, Buckwheat Springs. I'm Jaxon Lang," he said. As embarrassing as that column had been about him, he was pretty sure people would recall his name.

"Jaxon—"

"Jaxon Lang?" A woman's voice behind Jaxon interrupted the receptionist. It was an attractive petite woman with long, wavy dark hair, wearing an elegant wine-colored suit. She was returning to the office, accompanied by a thin man with short bleached hair in loose jeans and a green-striped button-down. "*You're* Jaxon?" she asked. A smile spread across her face.

"Yes," he replied, hesitating. "Can you help me find Kieran?"

"Jaxon!" the man said. "Good to meet you. I'm Chad Raines, a friend of Kieran's, and this is Alexa Harrington." Alexa's smile broadened as she checked him out in a way that made him very uncomfortable. *What did Kieran tell her about me?* Jaxon wondered with some alarm.

"Nice to meet you. Kieran mentioned both of you to me," Jaxon said, smiling for the first time since his plane touched down.

"Kieran hasn't stopped talking about you!" Alexa exclaimed. "Look, let's get out of the reception area." She and Chad took Jaxon through the magazine's offices and into an empty conference room. Alexa closed the door.

"Wow, Jaxon, you came all the way here to surprise Kieran?" she asked excitedly.

"I, uh, wanted to tell him that I accept his apology. I thought it might be nice to do it in person." Jaxon was pretty sure that these two—Kieran's closest friends—would know there was something more than simple friendship between the two men.

"Kieran will be thrilled," Chad said. "Here, let me write down his address and phone number for you." He scribbled on one of the notepads that dotted the table. "Kieran should be home. He's either working out at the gym, at home, or hanging out at Brut—that's a bar in his neighborhood—but it's too early, even for him."

"Why don't you call first?" Alexa suggested, and motioned to a phone on the conference table.

"I'm thinking it might be better to surprise him," Jaxon said. He was afraid Kieran might refuse to see him if he called ahead. *Or maybe Kieran isn't alone*, he worried.

"Good luck," Alexa said encouragingly. She was just as sweet and bubbly as Kieran described her. "Here's my cell number." She scribbled on another pad, ripped off the sheet,

and handed it to Jaxon. Before he could take it Chad snatched it out of her hand and scrawled his own number.

"You call either one of us if you have any problems, okay?" Chad said. "Not that you should. Kieran's going to be thrilled to see you, trust me."

"He's been moping around the past week or so," Alexa added, "since he quit his job. Well, pretty much since he got back to town."

"Yeah," Chad agreed, "Kieran hasn't been his usual self, that's for damn sure. The other night, he even turned down an underwear mod—" he cried out in pain as Alexa kicked him under the table. "He really misses you," Chad finished.

"Thanks, both of you. I'm going to head over there now. If I can't find him, would you be able to help me find a hotel to stay in? I kinda came up here on the spur of the moment and didn't really plan much out first."

"Don't worry," Chad said, patting Jaxon on the shoulder. "You can crash at my place if you need to."

"That's very generous, thank you," Jaxon said, and stood to go. Chad and Alexa rose and escorted Jaxon to the elevators, waving as the door closed on him.

* * * *

Jaxon couldn't believe how much traffic there was. It took half an hour to go what was probably only half a mile. *I could walk faster*, he thought with agitation. The taxi finally stopped in front of a distinguished-looking old building with a doorman standing outside in a red and black uniform. He opened the door for Jaxon.

Wow, Jaxon thought, *Kieran sure lives in some fancy place*. Definitely *not* the fifth-floor walk-up he originally imagined.

"Where you goin', Mister?" the man at the front desk asked. "You need to get announced first around here. No one goes up there without a key or gettin' announced." Apparently the lobby was his territory and he made the rules—or at least enforced them.

Only then did Jaxon realize there was no button on the elevator, only a keyhole. *Kieran wasn't kidding when he said he lived in a nice place*. He hadn't mentioned the high security, though.

"I'm here to see Kieran Quinn," Jaxon said. The middle-aged man sitting behind the desk wore an engraved gold nametag that said "Jim." He had a grizzled gray beard and gravelly voice that might have had a touch of the South in it, buried under several decades of Brooklyn.

"Mr. Quinn is not at home at present," Jim said. Jaxon's heart sank. He glanced at his watch: 5 p.m.

"I don't suppose you know where he went or when he'll be back?" Jaxon ventured, knowing it was probably useless.

"I'm sorry, sir, I wouldn't know," Jim replied. *Of course not*, Jaxon thought. "But he did have a couple of suitcases with him, so I have a feeling he's going to be gone for a while. Usually he leaves instructions for us when he travels, but he rushed right out before you got here." Jim shook his head and tsk'ed, as if leaving town without instructions to the building staff should be considered a felony.

"He had suitcases?" Where had Kieran gone? On a nice vacation to forget about Jaxon? To find someone new? *With* someone new?

"Yeah," Jim confirmed. "Left like five minutes before you walked in. How's that for bad timin'? You got a suitcase, too. Looks like you came in from out of town, huh?"

"Yeah," Jaxon said. "Do you have a phone I can use? I don't have a cell phone. I'm going to try calling Kieran's cell."

"Sure, Mister. For a friend of Mr. Quinn, sure." Jim motioned to a phone in the corner of the lobby. "Use that one. Not very private, but it works. No more payphones around anymore, you know."

"Thanks." Jaxon walked over to a black, old-fashioned rotary dial phone on an antique table crafted of dark polished wood. He pulled Kieran's number from his pocket and dialed. The phone went directly to voicemail. Jaxon hung up and waited a few minutes before trying again. He heard the lobby desk's phone ring. Jim answered.

"Yes, oh sure. I wondered what you wanted us to do. Of course. And, Mr. Quinn?"

Jaxon spun his head around.

"What should I tell your friend who came by to see you?" Jim asked into the phone. Jaxon's heart did a series of flips. He rushed over to the desk. "You don't know when you'll be back?" Jim asked. "I'll tell him, he's still here in the lobby, using the phone. He's got a suitcase with him, too, isn't that funny?" Jim chuckled into the phone like he was chatting with his best friend. He looked up at Jaxon and covered the mouthpiece. "Where you visitin' from, Mister?"

"Texas. Buckwheat Springs!" Jaxon said hurriedly. Jim repeated the information into the phone, nodded a few times, said goodbye, and hung up.

"What did he say?" Jaxon asked.

"He said he hopes you have a nice visit here in New York," Jim said pleasantly.

"Oh."

"You wanna leave a message?" Jim offered. "He calls to check for messages, you know."

"No, thanks," Jaxon said, and turned and headed for the door. A wave of loneliness and desolation crashed down on him as he wheeled his suitcase toward the entrance.

The doorman opened the door for Jaxon. But before he could walk through it, he was nearly knocked over, then grabbed and pulled into an embrace by someone entering. Someone tall. *Kieran*.

"Jax!" Kieran cried excitedly. "I can't believe you're here!" He pulled Jaxon farther into the lobby, arms wrapped around him and Jaxon couldn't think of anything he wanted more right now than to have Kieran holding his hand, dragging him through the lobby in a painfully exuberant embrace. Kieran kissed him.

There was nothing held back in the kiss. Jaxon poured out all his love and desire and relief, and Kieran responded hungrily. He took hold of Jaxon in a way that sent pleasurable electric shocks throughout his body. Kieran's lips crushed Jaxon's but he simply let himself be carried away with the emotion and passion. He opened himself up and welcomed Kieran in, wanting him so badly he thought he'd explode from

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

longing and pent-up desire. Kieran's tongue darted into Jaxon's mouth, Jaxon gave up completely to the desire coursing through his body.

Jaxon's hands went up behind Kieran's neck, fingers instinctively tangling in the familiar soft locks. For long, delicious minutes they reacquainted themselves with the taste and feel and closeness they both longed for. Only some minutes later did Jaxon recall they were still in the doorway, with Jim and the doorman looking on.

. Jaxon decided that he was most definitely going to have a very nice visit here in New York after all.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Epilogue

18 Months Later

"Tell me the story again?" Jaxon asked. He and Kieran lay in bed in their almost-completely renovated Victorian in San Francisco. They only needed to finish some decorating and it would be complete, perfect, and all their own.

"You're like a kid who wants to hear the same story every night, you know that?"

"That's not true," Jaxon defended himself. "I've only asked a few times. And since when do you know so much about kids?"

"Well, I know that gazing upon such an enormous example of mature masculine perfection you might not realize it," Kieran pulled the bed sheet down as he spoke so Jaxon could see all that perfection, "but I used to be a kid myself."

"You're awfully full of yourself," Jaxon replied, though he didn't mind the view.

"I don't hear you complaining when *you're* full of me," Kieran joked. "Back in New York, I could walk into a bar or club and leave with anyone I wanted. You shouldn't take me for granted."

"You really were a slut, huh?" Jaxon asked, his tone also amused. He knew Kieran could probably have just about any gay man he wanted in San Francisco—and a lot of straight ones too—but that didn't bother Jaxon. He was never jealous of anything Kieran had done before they met, and now trusted Kieran 100 percent.

"No, just picky and *very* irresistible. You couldn't resist me either."

Jaxon snorted.

"You're denying that? It didn't take three days for you to knock at my motel room door wanting to jump into bed with me. And you hadn't even seen me without my shirt. That's pretty fast, considering it was only a few days before your wedding *and* you thought you were straight. I wasn't even trying to seduce you."

"But you didn't get me that night, after all," Jaxon teased. "Besides, you know you wanted me the minute you laid eyes on me."

"Okay, that's true," Kieran conceded. "You had me the minute you opened your mouth and pronounced my name correctly. That was the first thing you ever said to me, correcting Danetta when she couldn't say it." Kieran laughed and put his arms around Jaxon. "You know, you could have your pick of guys around here, too. I realize how lucky I am to have you."

"You *are* lucky. So, tell me the story." Jaxon whispered into Kieran's ear.

"Okay. After you walked away from me in the airport—correction: After you threw the magazine at me and walked away, I sat there for ages trying to figure out how I'd ended up like that. One minute I was happier than I'd ever been; and the next, I was alone. I wrote most of that apology column right then, on that bench. I realized that I'd been lying and hurting people for a long time. You were the one who made me see the effect of my words immediately. I just

wrote down how I felt about what I'd done and how it made me feel about myself. Then I realized how hungry I was, so I went to find something to eat." Kieran paused and Jaxon punched him on the arm.

"Well, I did have to eat! The only flight available at that point was the red eye so I didn't get back home until 10 a.m. the next day and fell asleep immediately. Jeffries woke me up in the middle of the afternoon to find out when I'd be back in the office. I knew at that moment I was going to quit. He didn't even apologize for the way he'd Shanghaied my column. He was thrilled when I said I'd have my next piece to him the following day, so he left me alone. I went to his office Tuesday afternoon and handed him that final column, collected a couple of things from my desk, and went home."

"What about me?" Jaxon asked impatiently.

"I'm getting to that part," Kieran said "After I got home it really hit me that I was completely alone. No more job, no more *you*. The time we spent in Hawaii was so intense, and being alone with the knowledge I'd never see you again was unbearable. I drank a lot of tequila, and called Sam every day to ask about you."

"Every day?" This was one of Jaxon's favorite parts.

"Yes, *every* day. Jeffries tried to get me to change my mind at first—like he had any chance of that after what he pulled! After the column got printed I got a million calls, and a bunch of job offers, but I didn't want to think about any of that. I missed you so much! I kept thinking I'd hear from you after my column came out, but nothing. Sam told me maybe you'd forgiven me, but still no word from you. I knew I didn't

have much chance you'd trust me again, but I wanted you back so badly.

"Then Chad and Lex came over to stage an intervention. They wouldn't let me out of their sight for a few days. They made sure I ate, took me out to see "happy" movies, and did everything in their power to keep me from sitting around by myself drinking. They wouldn't let me call Sam, or I might have found out that you didn't even have my number. When they finally left me alone for a few hours, the first thing I did was book a flight to Texas. I didn't tell Chad or Lex in case they tried to talk me out of it."

"So that's where you were going when I arrived?"

"Yeah, I was on my way to the airport to try and get you back. Thank God for the terrible traffic or I would have been a lot farther away by the time I called the front desk. As soon as I heard you were in my lobby, I just got out of the taxi, told him to bring my bags back, and ran the couple of blocks back home—"

"And ran into me as I was leaving the building," Jaxon finished. "It was pretty evil of you not to tell Jim that you were on your way back. I was so upset when I thought you were leaving even though you knew I was in your lobby."

"Yeah, that *was* evil," Kieran admitted. "But wasn't it a much better surprise to see me when you didn't expect to?"

"Yes, but I still haven't forgiven you completely for that," Jaxon replied. "Why didn't you tell Sam you were coming?"

"I didn't want her to tell you, in case you wouldn't see me," Kieran said. "If only I had, we could have saved ourselves some stress."

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

"I like how the story ends, though," Jaxon said, snuggling into Kieran's embrace.

"Oh, it's not over. It gets better, you know," Kieran said, just as he'd told Jaxon the first time Kieran had made love to him.

"Prove it," Jaxon replied, laughing as Kieran nuzzled his throat.

* * * *

Jaxon had spent most of that summer in New York with Kieran, who wrote freelance pieces to replace his lost magazine salary. Jaxon resigned from his job in Buckwheat Springs and arranged to sell his house to Mike.

Jaxon and Kieran decided to move to San Francisco and make a new start there *together*, as soon as one of them had a job. By sheer luck they both found jobs before the end of the summer and quickly moved into a rented house near the Marina. They wanted to settle into their jobs and look around at all the neighborhoods before purchasing a house of their own.

Jaxon took a job as principal in a school that had significant problems with student and teacher retention, as well as low test scores and college acceptance rates. Absenteeism and on-campus violence were also major concerns, and problems he'd never faced before. Jaxon was thrilled by the challenge; and after his first year he'd already seen improvements in all areas. He could hardly have done worse than his predecessors, but he counted it as a victory.

He enjoyed learning about the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of his students and staff, and his personal touch soon made an impression on the school. Several teachers admitted that they had considered leaving; but once Jaxon took over, they realized the environment would improve dramatically and they decided to stay.

Professionally, Kieran had more than landed on his feet. He turned down all the job offers he got after his final column, regardless of the prestige of the publication or the salary he was offered. Instead he got his dream job, with a little help from Alexa. He was now one of the restaurant and food critics for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Not only did he get to eat just about wherever and whatever he wanted, he also could use his talent for ridicule and condescension—on occasion—without really hurting anyone. He hadn't originally intended to resort to that style, but one restaurant was so atrocious, he just couldn't restrain his criticism. The negative review was considered so amusing that it actually encouraged more people to go to the restaurant, just to see if it was actually as bad as Kieran had written. It soon became fashionable to get a bad review from Kieran, and readers flocked to the places he panned. But he was scrupulously careful not to give into temptation to make this a regular theme of his reviews.

More astonishing to Kieran was an invitation to give a series of lectures on ethics in journalism at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism during the fall. He was so well-received that the school asked him to teach a separate course on personal ethics in journalism.

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

* * * *

While they searched for the perfect house in San Francisco, Kieran put his SoHo loft on the market. Alexa had offered to work with the real estate agent so Kieran wouldn't need to go back unless absolutely necessary. One evening Kieran showed Jaxon the listing sheet the agent e-mailed to him.

"I had no idea your loft was worth that much," Jaxon remarked. "They paid you enough to afford a place like that?"

"Not exactly," Kieran replied. "I sorta dated the previous owner."

"*Dated?*" Jaxon asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Yeah. He sold me the place at a slightly, uh, below-market rate," Kieran explained. "You have no idea what the Manhattan real estate market is like." Kieran added with a nervous shrug.

"Slut," Jaxon said in a judgmental tone, but he was smiling.

"Technically, I'm a whore," Kieran admitted. "But it worked to around a hundred thousand per fuck; so at least I'm not cheap. Just think how much you'd owe me if I charged you even half that much?"

Jaxon snorted and Kieran relaxed. He had vowed to be completely honest about everything, even when Jaxon might not necessarily want to know. Kieran wouldn't risk losing Jaxon again because of a lie. It was better to try and deal with Jaxon's reaction to the truth; and so far, it had worked for both of them.

Jaxon invited Tom for a visit, to help them find a house they could afford to buy and remodel. Tom even helped them find a reputable contractor and negotiate a very competitive price for the renovations.

Kieran's new job sparked a passion in him for cooking. He and insisted they create the best kitchen they could afford. This decision led to the final phase of the renovations being delayed a full month.

Kieran made their moving-in day one Jaxon would never forget by proposing as they sipped celebratory glasses of champagne on their bay-view roof deck.

"Well," Jaxon said, "we've already had a honeymoon. We may as well get married."

Their lovely Pacific Heights Victorian was nearly finished, and they were in the midst of making final plans for their wedding.

Kieran and Jaxon would be married legally in Canada, during Jaxon's winter break. A small group of relatives and some special friends would attend: Chad, Alexa, Sam and her partner Milly, Jordan, Mike and his fiancée Kristin. Tom and Jamie couldn't make it because Jamie was pregnant again—this time with twins—and was due just before the wedding. Afterwards, everyone would all spend a few days skiing. Kieran didn't fail to notice the irony that his real honeymoon with Jaxon would in fact be in a place where Jaxon would have to keep his clothes on almost all of the time. *Almost*.

"Jax, I just need to remind you of one thing," Kieran said.

Sex, Lies, and Wedding Bells
by EM Lynley

"What's left?" Jaxon asked. "We've taken care of everything, haven't we?" He skimmed the checklist to see what he might have forgotten.

"If you leave *me* at the altar, it's the last thing you'll ever do," Kieran warned. He pulled Jaxon to him and gave him plenty of reasons not to.

The End