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NOT IN LOVE

ALI HAZELWOOD



SPHERE

SIMPLE ENOUGH

RUE

Ladies, this is a genuine, nonrhetorical question: How do the two of you survive in the real world?"

I stared at Nyota's contemptuous expression, reflecting on the unique brand of humiliation that came with having one's best friend's little sister (who'd been repeatedly rebuffed when attempting to enter the backyard tree house; who'd publicly feasted on a booger at Christmas 2009; who'd been caught French-kissing a clementine in the linen closet a few short months later) question one's ability to carry out a productive existence.

Then again, back in the day, Tisha and I had been three whole years older than her, and we'd harbored a clearly misplaced superiority complex. We knew better now that little Nyota was twenty-four, a law school prodigy, and a newly minted bankruptcy lawyer whose billable hours were worth more than my tragically high car insurance premium. To add insult to injury, I followed her on

Instagram, which was how I knew she could bench-press more than her weight, looked incredible in a monokini, and regularly baked onion rosemary focaccia from scratch.

In a powerful flex whose brilliance kept me awake at night, Nyota had never followed me back.

"You know us," I said, choosing honesty over pride. Tisha and I were holed up inside my closet-sized office at Kline, FaceTiming someone who'd probably never even saved our phone numbers. Dignity was the least of our worries. "We are barely hanging on."

"Can you just answer the question?" Tisha bristled. As humbling as this was for me, it had to be much worse for her. Nyota was *her* sister, after all.

"Really? You call me in the middle of the workday to ask what a *loan assignment* is? You couldn't google it?"

"We did," I said, omitting that we'd added *for dummies* to the search. And yet. "We got the gist of it, we think."

"Great, then you're golden. I'm hanging up, see you both at Thanksgiving—"

"However," I interrupted. It was late May. "The reactions of other Kline employees seem to suggest that we might not be fully grasping the implications of this *loan assignment*." My threshold for odd was high, and I'd been able to brush off the HR rep brazenly browsing monster.com at his standing desk, the chemists who'd bumped into me face-first and run away with nary an oops, the vacant stare of my usually dictatorial boss, Matt, when I'd informed him that the report he was waiting on would take at least three more hours. Then, while I was emptying my water bottle into a potted plant that had lived in the break room longer than I'd been in the workforce, a technician had burst into tears and suggested,

You should take Christofern home, Dr. Siebert. It shouldn't die just because of what's about to happen to Kline.

I had *no clue* what was going on. All I knew was that I loved my current job at Kline, the most important project of my life was at a pivotal point, and I was too socially challenged to easily transition to another workplace. Today's event did not bode well. "There's going to be an assembly in fifteen minutes," I explained, "and we'd love to walk in with a better idea of what—"

"Ny, stop bitching and just regurgitate it for us like we're five," Tisha ordered.

"You guys are *doctors*," Nyota pointed out—*not* as a compliment.

"Okay, listen carefully, Ny, 'cause this will blow your mind and we might have to report it to the UN and have a trial at The Hague: the topic of private equity firms and loan assignments did *not* come up in *any* class during our chemical engineering PhDs. A *shocking* oversight, I know, and I'm sure NATO will want to take military action—"

"Zip it, Tish. You don't get to snark when *you* need something from *me*. Rue, how did you find out about the loan assignment?"

"Florence sent out a company-wide email," I said. "This morning."

"Florence is Kline's CEO?"

"Yes." It seemed reductive, so I added, "And founder." Still not exhaustive, but there was a time and place for fangirling, and this wasn't it.

"Did it say anything about which private equity bought your loan?"

I skimmed the body of the email. "The Harkness Group."

"Hmm. Rings a bell." Nyota typed away in silence, the New

York City skyline gleaming behind her. Her office was in a high-rise—thousands of miles and an entire universe from North Austin. Like Tisha and me, she'd been eager to get out of Texas. Unlike us, she'd never moved back. "Ah, yeah. *Those* guys," she said eventually, squinting at her computer screen.

"Do you know them?" Tisha asked. "Are they, like, famous?"

"It's a private equity firm, not a K-pop band. But they *are* well known in tech circles." She bit her lip. Suddenly her expression was the opposite of reassuring, and I felt Tisha tense beside me.

"This is not the first time something like this has happened," I said, refusing to give in to panic. I had graduated from UT Austin a year earlier, but I'd been working for Florence Kline since before finishing my PhD. None of this felt new. "There are management shake-ups and investor issues all the time. It always settles down."

"Not sure about this time, Rue." Nyota's brow creased into a scowl. "Listen, Harkness is a private equity firm."

"Still don't know what that means," Tisha bristled.

"As I was going to explain, private equities are . . . groups of people with lots and lots of money and spare time. And instead of frolicking in their hard-earned cash Scrooge McDuck-style, or leaving it in savings accounts like the two of you—"

"Bold of you to assume I have savings," Tisha muttered.

"—they use it to buy other companies."

"And they bought Kline?" I asked.

"Nope. Kline hasn't gone public—you can't buy Kline's stocks. But back when it was founded, it needed money to develop . . . ravioli? Is that what you guys do?"

"Food nanotechnology."

"Sure. Let's pretend that means something. Anyway, when

Florence founded Kline, she got a big loan. But now, whoever gave her the money decided to sell that loan to Harkness."

"Which means that now Kline owes the money to Harkness?"

"Correct. See, Rue, I knew you weren't *totally* useless. My sister, on the other hand, never ceases to . . ." Nyota's voice drifted as she frowned at her computer.

"What?" Tisha asked, alarmed. Nyota wasn't the type to stop mid-insult. "What happened?"

"Nothing. I'm just reading up on Harkness. They're well respected. Focused on midsize tech startups. I think they have a couple of science guys on the inside? They acquire promising companies, provide capital and support to grow them, sell them for a profit. Buying a loan seems a little out of their MO."

Tisha's fingers closed around my thigh, and I covered her hand with my palm. Physical comfort was rarely in my repertoire, but making exceptions for Tisha was no trouble. "So all Florence needs to do is pay back the loan to Harkness, and Harkness will be out of the picture?" I asked. Seemed simple enough. No need to involve monster.com.

"Uh . . . in the rainbow world you live in, maybe. Have fun frolicking with the unicorns, Rue. There's no way Florence has the money."

Tisha's grip tightened. "Ny, what does it mean, in practice? Does it mean that they take control of the company?"

"Maybe. It'll depend on the loan contract."

I shook my head. "Florence would never let them do that."

"Florence might not have a choice." Nyota's voice softened abruptly, and that—out of everything, *that* made the first tinges of fear hook into my stomach. "Depending on the terms of the

agreement, Harkness might have the right to install a new CTO and seriously interfere in day-to-day operations."

Asking what a CTO was wasn't going to get me any closer to an Instagram follow, so I just said, "Okay. What's the bottom line?"

"Harkness might end up being a nonissue. Or it might be the reason you need to find new jobs. Right now, it's impossible to tell."

Tisha's "fuck" was a soft muttering. *Florence*, I thought, and my mouth felt dry. *Where is Florence right now? How is Florence right now?* "Thank you, Nyota," I said. "This was very helpful."

"Call me after today's assembly—we'll have a better idea by then." It was nice of her, that *we*. "But it wouldn't hurt to start sprucing up your CV, just in case. Austin is a great place for tech startups. Look around online, ask your nerd friends if they have leads. Do you guys have any friends, aside from each other?"

"I have Bruce."

"Bruce is a *cat*, Tish."

"And your point?"

They started bickering, and I tuned them out, trying to calculate the likelihood of Tisha and me finding another job together. One that would pay well and afford us the scientific freedom we currently had. Florence had even allowed me to—

A horrifying thought stabbed at me. "What about our personal projects? Employees' patents?"

"Mm?" Nyota cocked her head. "Employees' patents? For what?"

"In my case, a bio-nanocomposite that—"

"Uh-huh, hold the TED Talk."

"It's something that makes produce stay fresher. Longer."

"Ah. I see." She nodded in understanding, her eyes suddenly

warmer, and I wondered what she knew. Tisha would never mention my history, but Nyota was observant and could very well have noticed on her own. After all, for years I'd spent every spare moment at their house, just to avoid returning to my own. "This is *your* project? *Your* patent? And you have an agreement that guarantees *you* ownership of this tech?"

"Yes. But if Kline changes hands—"

"As long as the agreement is in writing, you're good."

I remembered an email from Florence. Long words, small fonts, electronic signatures. Relief punched through me. *Thank you, Florence.*

"Guys, try not to sweat this too much, okay? Go to the assembly you're probably already late for. Find out all you can and report back. And for the love of Justice Brown Jackson, update your damn CVs. You haven't been a pet groomer since undergrad, Tish."

"Get off my LinkedIn," Tisha muttered, but she was flipping off an already blank screen. So she leaned back in her chair and settled for another subdued "fuck."

I stared ahead and nodded. "Indeed."

"Neither of us has the emotional constitution for job insecurity."

"Nope."

"I mean, we'll be all right. We're in tech. It's just . . ."

I nodded once more. We were happy at Kline. Together. With Florence.

Florence. "Last night, Florence texted me," I told Tisha. "Asked if I wanted to go over to her place."

She turned. "Did she say why?"

I shook my head, feeling half-embarrassed, half-guilty. *Way to show up for your friends, Rue.* "I told her I had plans."

"What were you—oh, right. Your quarterly sex-up. Rue After Dark. Oh my god, how have we not talked about *the guy*?"

"What guy?"

"Really? You send me a picture of some dude's driver's license and then ask *what guy*? Nice try."

"It was a valiant attempt." I stood, trying to avoid remembering deep-set blue eyes. That Grecian urn profile that had forced me to stare. The short brown curls, just this side of too messy. He'd kept his eyes straight ahead as he drove me home, as if adamant not to look in my direction.

"Have you heard from him? Assuming you did the unthinkable and"—she gasped, clutching her sternum—"gave him your *number*."

"I haven't checked my phone." It now lived at the very bottom of my backpack, pressed under an extra hoodie, and my water bottle, and a stack of books that were due back at the library in two days. It was going to stay there, at least as long as I caught myself wondering every ten minutes whether he had texted.

I liked to force myself to keep a certain detachment when it came to *hes*.

"I should have gone to Florence's," I said, remorse prickling at the bottom of my stomach.

"Nah. Having to choose between you getting laid and having a heads-up on this here clusterfuck, I'd probably choose orgasms for you. I'm a generous soul like that." Tisha lowered her voice as we walked side by side, treading down Kline's sea-blue, ultramodern hallways that teemed with employees, all heading toward the open space on the first floor. They all smiled at Tisha—and nodded at *me*, polite but much more somber.

Kline had started out as a small tech startup, then quickly ballooned to several hundred employees, and I'd stopped keeping

track of new hires. Plus, the solitary nature of my project made me a bit of an unknown quantity. The tall, serious, distant girl—who always hung out with the *other* tall girl, the funny and delightful one everybody loved. At Kline, Tisha's and my popularity levels were as mismatched as they'd been since elementary school. Luckily, I'd learned not to mind.

"Sadly," I murmured, "no orgasms were had."

"What? He did *not* look like he'd be bad at sex!"

"I wouldn't know."

She scowled. "Isn't that what you met him for?"

"Originally."

"And?"

"Vincent showed up."

"Oh, *fuck* Vincent. How did he—I don't even wanna know. Next time, then?"

Since you never do repeats, he'd said, and my body had heated at the wistfulness in his tone.

"I don't know," I whispered truthfully, feeling some of that wistfulness myself as Tisha and I took a seat on a couch at the back of the room. "I think that—"

"Never a dull fucking moment," said a musical voice, and the cushion dipped on my left side. Jay was our favorite lab technician. Or, more accurately, Tisha's favorite, whom she'd swiftly befriended. By virtue of always being around her, I'd been folded into that relationship. It was the unabridged story of my social life. "I swear to god," he said, "if they fire all of us and my visa falls through and I have to go back to Portugal and Sana breaks up with me—"

"Love the optimism, babe." From the other side of me, Tisha leaned forward with a grin. "We researched this whole mess, by the way. We can tell you what a loan assignment is."

Jay's eyebrow arched, and the piercings speared through it flickered. "You didn't know *before*?"

Tisha shrank back, disappearing behind me. "There, there." I patted her leg comfortingly. "At least we've never pretended to be anything but what we are."

"Dumbasses?"

"Apparently."

A waterfall of red curls appeared in the crowd, and the knot of panic in my chest instantly loosened. *Florence*. Brilliant, resourceful Florence. She *was* Kline. She'd fought tooth and nail for it, and wasn't going to allow anyone to take it from her. Certainly not some—

"Who are those four?" Tisha whispered in the sudden hush of the room. Her gaze had drifted past Florence, to the figures standing beside her.

"Someone from Harkness?" Jay guessed.

I had expected slicked-back hair, and suits, and that uniquely off-putting finance bro flair. The Harkness people, however, looked like they might have belonged at Kline in a different timeline. Maybe dressing down was just a power move on their part, but they seemed . . . normal. Approachable. The long-haired woman was at ease in her jeans and seemed pleased with the turnout, and so did the broad-shouldered man who stood just a little too close to her. The tall figure in the well-groomed beard surveyed the room a touch haughtily, but who was *I* to judge? I'd been told several times I didn't exactly inspire fuzzy warmth. And the fourth man, the one who joined the group last, gait unhurried and smile confident, he seemed . . .

The blood congealed in my veins.

"I already hate them," Jay mumbled, making Tisha laugh.

"You hate *everybody*."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. Doesn't he, Rue?"

I nodded absently, eyes stuck on the fourth Harkness man like a bird caught in an oil spill. My head spun and the room ran out of air, because unlike the others', his face was familiar.

Unlike the others, I knew exactly who he was.