

“Dinner was great,” I commented as we walked down the sidewalk towards the park. The cool autumn air was just arriving and rustled the dying leaves in the trees that hovered over our heads like umbrellas. Of course I hadn’t anticipated this change in the weather when I picked out my outfit a week prior and was now fighting to prevent my teeth from chattering. It wasn’t only the temperature that was affecting me; this date had been perfect so far and I was both excited and nervous about how it would end.

Brandon chuckled and wrapped an arm around me. Even with his short-sleeved shirt, his strong arm was warm around my body. Despite my awful attempt at small talk, he didn’t make me feel awkward. When I wasn’t overanalyzing everything, it felt as if we’d known each other for much longer than the three weeks we’d worked together. Conversation was easy with him.

I had worked at my job for nearly two years and had seen many people come and go from the company, but had always maintained a separation with my social life and my work life. Yes, I’d occasionally join a couple of coworkers at the bar and then there were always the Christmas parties... But I was divorced and had spent the last five years figuring out who I was. Boyfriends would come and go, but I didn’t believe I would find a real connection again. Regardless of how common it was, who really wanted a used woman? I chuckled when I thought of myself like that. I didn’t have self-esteem issues, but rather a bleak, seemingly realistic view of what my romantic future would be.

Brandon was different. I listened to the tittering of the other women in the department when he started, but I never expected the tall, dark haired man who looked like he should be on the cover of a magazine rather than working in an insurance office to take a second look at me. I took pride in my appearance, but I was neither a young twenty-something anymore nor a model. The corners of my eyes had the beginning of soft laugh lines and my breasts had begun relying on my expensive bras to keep their youthful appearance. I wasn’t ashamed of my looks, but I didn’t expect to impress anyone, either, especially at the office.

I would have to be blind not to notice Brandon, though. He not only looked good, but there was an air of confidence that surrounded him, even when he was doing something as mundane as getting a cup of coffee. I admit that I was taken by surprise when our casual small talk in the break room turned into an actual request for a date. I was even more shocked when he asked again after I turned him down.

Brandon’s thumb caressed my ribs as we walked towards the small lake in the park. It was a beautiful night despite the chill in the air, or maybe because of it. Small waves rippled to the shore in the water ahead of us as the off-white street lights illuminated the path. We were talking about his childhood, sharing humorous anecdotes about awkward adolescent dates when we gravitated towards a tree near the lake. The ducks that had been nesting nearby quacked grumpily and waddled into the water while I moved to rest my back against the trunk.

Those lips... I know I stared at them at least a hundred times at dinner and had imagined them when I had put on my lip gloss earlier that night, but now, as he stood in front of me, it was hard to think about anything else than how they’d feel pressed against me. A rush of heat washed over me and my breath I was inhaling staggered. What was wrong with me? I wasn’t seventeen. My eyes drifted back to his blue orbs and I nodded appropriately as he shared a story of a blind date he took to his sister’s wedding.

Thump... thump, thump... I swear everyone in a three mile radius could hear my heart pounding as the conversation stalled and we were looking for the subtle cues on where to go from here. I straightened a little and tilted my head as I held his gaze in the silence that radiated sexual tension. *Just kiss him*, my brain screamed, but I didn’t want to ruin this moment. *Patience*, my heart responded as it beat a little faster.

The wind blew in off the water and pushed my brown locks back, both exposing my porcelain neck and almost urging Brandon towards me. He reached up with a hand and tucked a stubborn strand

of hair behind my ear as he stepped forward. I'm sure his words were perfect as his tone had softened, but all I could hear was my heart beating and myself struggling to swallow. *Breathe*, my mind insisted as it got on board with the wishes of my heart.

I nodded, unsure if it was to something he had said or to the conversation I was having with myself. My tongue barely parted my lips to moisten them while Brandon's hand remained on my cheek. My head leaned in the slightest amount to rest against his warm palm while my chin lifted in anticipation. What if all I had built this up to be was ruined by the kiss? All the chemistry we seemed to have could be ruined in this one-

I didn't have time to finish the thought. His lips captured mine in a soft, but confident first kiss. My lips seemed to swell in response and I pushed away from the tree to be closer to Brandon. Even with closed eyes, I could still picture the perfection of his lips as they moved against mine in an embrace that lasted longer than a tentative first kiss should have. My hand moved to his chest just to see if his heart was racing like mine was. It was.

By the time we parted for a breath, his arms had embraced me and mine had moved around his neck. The smile that formed on my lips felt like none other I had experienced and the ducks that seemed to have just departed were now specks on the far side of the lake. There was no cold, no awkwardness, just a perfect moment after a kiss that I seemed to have been waiting a lifetime for.

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The divorce was very public. It wasn't every day that a self-made millionaire with no pre-nup separated from his wife. She had caught him cheating and for it, Michelle was given half of the company (which she sold) plus a healthy alimony. So why was she working? Brandon had been with many wealthy women in the past, all of whom were self-absorbed and obviously rich by anyone who looked at them. They lived in a world of expensive clothes, cars, and an addiction to staying young. Michelle didn't fit the stereotype. She seemed more common, simpler, and out of place with what her status on paper suggested. Regardless, the team had picked her out as a target and it was his job to go along with it.

It was easy to get physically close to Michelle; she worked at a company with a high turnover rate for employees. With Brandon's natural charisma, he was offered the job on the first interview. He waited a few days after he started before he began speaking with her casually, taking time to study her habits both at work and away. She was plain, but beautiful, not that that mattered. His only job was to get close, get the money, and disappear. Michelle rarely interacted with her coworkers on a personal level, which had made it a little more of a challenge, not that he minded.

Their eventual date had gone as Brandon had expected. He met Michelle at the restaurant, they ate, and then he suggested they take a walk - a classic move. The night was insignificant to him and these moments seemed to just be something to pass the time until he moved onto his next job. Others in a real date situation might have seen the night as beautiful or her silhouette as stunning as the dim light softened any of her imperfections. It wasn't as if he wasn't attracted to the woman or any of the women who he'd scammed, but real attachments weren't allowed in his line of work.

As they strolled, Brandon did most of the talking, another way to maintain control of the situation. He had accumulated many stories to tell as he perfected his craft and was more than capable of catering the conversation to the person. Michelle was more down to earth, so the stories he made up to tell her were something that could connect with her. He highly doubted an anecdote of crashing his Mercedes into the side of a police car would impress this one, so he shared stories about a prom he never went to and a sister he didn't have as they walked as a couple down the quiet street towards a nearby park.

He couldn't have forced the plan to execute any better. Michelle was underdressed for the weather, so his arm was welcomed by the brunette. Good, she wasn't still pushing him away like she'd

verbally done at his first attempt at asking her out. They continued towards the lake that smelled almost as if raw sewage had been dumped into it, but Brandon's date didn't seem to notice or care.

During a lull in the conversation, he'd caught her staring at him with "the look" after she'd propped herself up against the tree. Brandon smiled as they exchanged words, but he was only putting on a show. What would he have done if this had been a real date? How long had it been since he had a "normal" relationship? Was he even capable of that anymore?

As the breeze picked up behind him and moved Michelle's hair from her face, he felt a rare tinge of remorse. On paper, she was another paycheck. This is how he always saw his targets, but Michelle... She was different from those superficial women. Even as his fingers brushed a strand of hair from her face (so classic and cliché), he knew he didn't want this artificial connection. He didn't want this for her. If he could've leaned away, broken the concocted tension between them and not jeopardized his job, Brandon would've. This kiss wasn't meant for him and for once, he didn't want to play along.

Michelle's eyes looked toward Brandon's lips, and then reconnected with his eyes. She was expecting this. She had fallen so perfectly for his act. He couldn't stop now. Brandon watched as her head tilted ever so slightly against his hand and he felt sorry for her, maybe even a little sorry for himself. Regardless, he closed the space between them and leaned down until their lips met. All the women he'd seduced, kissed, slept with, and stolen from flashed through his mind. He didn't have a single regret until now.

Brandon naturally pulled her closer, a script he'd perfected over the years, while the kiss lingered longer than he would've liked. Michelle rested her hand against his chest and he felt how hard it was beating. Unusual. She was going to discover his secret, but instead of retracting back, her arms snaked around his neck and he relaxed into the embrace again.

When the two finally parted, he could see his date, his target, radiating with happiness. Fuck. This one was going to be harder than he thought.

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