

ONE

Nine months ago

Kadie Harris could feel him watching.

It didn't matter that she couldn't see him, she could feel him lurking. The prickle on the back of her neck wasn't unpleasant anxiety, it was agitated anticipation building to fever pitch. Somehow, somewhere, he was here.

Walking through the deserted park on her way back to work, she took one measured step after another, listening to the tattoo of her high-heels and speculating about when he might choose to show himself.

Being without him tortured her every day they were apart. Their agonizing periods of separation were interrupted by sudden concentrations of intensity that were often cut short. Passion and love exploded when they came together to make up for every second he'd spent away from her side and it defined their pained farewells.

Their apartment was nearby. She considered whether or not she should go home just to try to draw him out. But she'd learned long ago to trust him. He knew how to play her, how to torment her, how to be patient in the face of her zeal. Only in his own good time would he appear to her, and he'd make sure it was worth the wait.

Experience taught her that he always made their reunion memorable, but that didn't assuage her eagerness. Kadie had never been particularly good at holding her horses. "Come on, Hotshot. Where are you?" she muttered to herself.

It had been too long, and she needed him. She didn't want to wait anymore. Weeks had passed since she had last heard from him. Worrying was ridiculous because the man she loved was capable of defending himself. Yet, somehow that never quite alleviated the concern that plagued her every day she didn't receive word.

In the five years they'd been together, he'd spent weeks, sometimes months, away from their life, but he always came back to her and she had to make herself believe that he always would.

After another half dozen steps, Kadie stopped. A spike of adrenaline told her he was close, closer than he'd been all day. She'd learned not to ignore her instincts. Sure enough, when she spun around, there stood her love, right on her heels.

"This is your version of a hello?" Kadie asked, trying not to show any joy. "Some people would call it stalking." Usually when they came back together after a period apart, there was elation in his affect. Today, there was nothing but blank intensity, and that wiped the grin from her face. "What? What is it?"

One of his arms came around her waist, and without further ceremony, she was tugged to his body. Tucker Holt's mouth took her words and sanity. She should have known better than to try to think or reason when Tuck had made up his mind.

There she was in his arms, pressed against the broad, solid chest that had served as her pillow on so many nights. This was what she'd been waiting for and she was going to enjoy it.

All too soon his mouth left hers. Drifting on the memory of their previous goodbye, which had lasted her all these weeks, she had to convince herself that this was real and not another of her lucid dreams. Sometimes when she woke in a sweat, coiled in their sheets, she would reach for him because the sensations in her dreams had been so real that she'd be almost convinced they'd just made love. But he had never been there, he so rarely was.

Releasing her tension, she slid a hand from his shoulder to his bicep and let her fingers slip under the fabric of his tee shirt sleeve to pinch his flesh with her long nails.

“All real, Toots.”

His heated words rested on her lips. Try as he might to convince her everything was rosy, she could tell that he was carrying a burden heavier than any she'd seen on his shoulders before. Her head was still swimming. His presence made her heady, making it difficult to think and questioning him even harder.

Just having him with her, safe, alive, holding her, gave her an endorphin boost. He had come back to her just as she'd known he would. The only thing that would keep him from her side was death. He joked with her about having a return sender tattooed on his ass in case of the worst. While he found the idea funny, she did not.

If he wasn't going to be forthcoming about what was on his mind, she was going to have to be creative about getting her answers. “Two weeks,” she said, punching his shoulder with the hand that had just caressed and pinched. “I haven't heard a peep from you in two weeks!”

He didn't decrease the stranglehold of his embrace. “I told you I'd hit a delay.”

If she cut him any slack, he wouldn't recognize her. “And you were nowhere near a server of any kind? Somehow I doubt that.”

Shoving out of his clinch, she sprang back when his arms flexed then locked. Tuck would let go of her when he was ready and not a single heartbeat before, “Are you sulking?”

Unwilling to relent just yet, she considered his question because her answer would depend on his reply to her next query. “How long are you home for?”

Crouching lower, he smelled her hair. Burying his face in her locks, he moved it side to side reveling in the texture. Tuck could be affectionate. He'd learned how to trust her enough to act on his emotional impulses in the same way he would to physical threats: on instinct. Their usual greetings were teasing and flirtatious, and sex was high on the agenda. This man, squeezing her, seeking comfort, was troubled.

Reducing her rankle, she wanted to be what he needed, but he so rarely let her in. “Anyone would think that you missed me,” she murmured, stroking the back of his head.

“You have no idea.”

When he kissed her again, he cradled the back of her skull and dipped her until her balance was entirely at his mercy. They'd kissed a million times over the last five years, but the chemical reaction that their bodies created when combined hadn't become any less combustible.

As he eased his lips away, he didn't put her back onto her feet. Kadie didn't care about her physical balance, she'd forgotten where she was, who was here, and her very reason for being. In his presence, Kadie's world shrank, just as his did. Together, their universe reduced itself to two occupants and that was all they needed. With each other, anything could be achieved. He made her feel that she could take on the world. Not that she would ever need to because he would do it for her, every time.

Forcing herself to open her eyes, she absorbed his features. Every minute together was so precious that she felt the need to cling onto every nuance. “You are something to look at, Tucker Holt,” she whispered.

Lean and always ready for action, Kadie knew just how ripped every inch of her man's body was. Not that the light-brown hair, presently a little on the long side, with its sparkling natural blonde highlights and his penetrating blue eyes were anything to shrug at.

Pulling her upright again, he held her close and squeezed her so tight that there was no denying something was plaguing him. The stubble on his chin dragged and snagged on her hair, but she enjoyed the familiarity of the friction.

“Let's go home,” he said and began to pull her toward the path that would take them to their apartment.

Ah, this was more like just-come-back Tuck, single-minded and overbearing, edgy until he released himself into her. Kadie laughed. “I have to go back to work. I have a meeting and—”

“Dempsey can handle it,” he said and when he took her hand and tugged her along, she followed.

While scurrying along behind him, she tried to make him see sense and remind him of their responsibilities, even though she wanted to go home as much as he did. Except making his life hard was what kept things interesting between them. Ubiquitous banter was synonymous with foreplay. “Dempsey and I have a meeting this afternoon, with a company we've been courting for a while.”

Dempsey, her cousin, had been the one to introduce her to Tuck. Since then, she and her cousin had run Tuck's firm while he gallivanted off to take care of less reputable practitioners. Truth was, she

didn't know what he did when he wasn't with her and she didn't like to ask. Maintaining their often separate lives never made her doubt their relationship, having him sometimes was better than having him never.

"The meeting has been cancelled," Tuck called over his shoulder, still dragging her along. "They've hit a digital snag."

Her brows rose. Tuck was a planner. Always had been. He hadn't met a hiccup he couldn't thwart with his superior tech skills. "A digital snag?" she asked. "What is that code for? What did you do?"

"They might have a little virus problem."

The amused pride in his voice didn't surprise her. "A virus," she said and stopped, pulling her arm up and down to shake it out of his hold. "Tuck!"

The company's duty was to find weaknesses in corporate security. Tuck was the brains behind the operation, she and Dempsey ran the company for him and were the public face of it. None of their clients knew who Tuck was because he did his hacking from external locations. He was the faceless wizard behind the curtain. Once he'd poked holes in their client's electronic security, he gave reports to Dempsey, who then worked with the client to toughen up their barriers.

That was what Tuck's legitimate company did. The work that took him away for such long periods of time wasn't exactly on the books... or the up and up from what she gathered.

Tuck wasn't dissuaded. "The system will reset in twelve hours. By the time they're enjoying their morning coffee, everything will be back as it should be," he said and came back to put an arm around her waist to get her moving again.

She kept on going until they were out of the park and down the block on their way to the apartment she shared with him when he was around. Having an apartment that bordered the park was her dream and Tuck delivered. Everything he did seemed effortless, nothing was too much for her. She could ask for the moon and he'd find a way to give it to her.

"Only you could come up with that solution," she said as they ran up the external stairs to their place. "I tell you that I have an appointment with a client—our client—and what do you tell me? That you've already infected their company with a computer virus, ensuring that my appointment has been cancelled because the whole place is in disarray."

Her key slid into the lock and his hands landed on her shoulders from behind when she turned it and pushed through the glass paneled wooden door that opened into their dining kitchen.

"It was only a little virus," he said.

"A little virus," she said, going inside and dumping her purse on the table. These teasing exchanges were missed when he wasn't around, not that this was the time to tell him that. No, this was the time to read him the riot act. Ruffling her feathers got him going and she'd learned the carnal value of ruffling his. "Dempsey has been working to improve their security. They're our client, now we look like idiots."

She spun around to glare, but received no apology. "I did it for a good cause," he said.

The predatory tone in his voice matched the look in his eye. She hadn't even taken her jacket off and he was onto the seduction.

Resisting with disapproval was her role. "To free up my afternoon so you can get laid is not a good cause. Do we have to talk about your boundary issues again?"

He snapped the lock on the door, shirked his jacket, and began to stalk her. "Depends on your perspective. I say it's a good cause," he said. "And you're going to get laid too."

He knew her too well. Boy, had she missed him. Edging back as he advanced, she could never escape him when he was this hungry. "You expect me to give it up when you haven't answered my question?" Her spine hit the wall beside the fridge just next to the corridor that led to the bathroom... and their bedroom.

"What question?"

The most important question, the one she always asked: how long did she have with him before he deserted her again? Now, he was upon her, gathering her into his arms, forcing her weight to her tiptoes. He knew what she wanted to know and that saying goodbye was always a raw sorrow, so she could forgive him for not wanting to address the issue, especially if it would have an answer that might upset her.

Shallow breaths and a pliant soul signaled her surrender, she was his, in every sense. "Tuck," she murmured, pressing her hands to his chest, reminding herself again and again that this was real. She

couldn't wake from this dream and be disappointed again. Speckled shivers darted through her skull as her body grew heavier, he didn't hesitate.

"Shh," he reassured, covering her hands with his and then bringing them to his mouth. "You've got me, baby, I'm home."

"For real?" she asked, daring herself to believe he meant it. In time he would go, he always did, it was the nature of his occupation. It could be days, weeks, sometimes months, but eventually he would leave and they would do this all over again.

"For real."

Bending his knees to line up their mouths, Tuck let his eyes linger on hers for half a beat before he leaned in and pressed his mouth to hers. Alone at last, in the home they shared, Kadie could forgive him for threatening the contract with the client. She'd forgive him anything as he collected her into his embrace and began to maneuver her backwards towards their bedroom. Joining, connecting, savoring their time together, he was her only priority.

Their relationship was what kept her going. Despite the distance, she was never lonely because he would always be there for her. If she demanded that he drop everything and come home to her then he would. Kadie had never done it, recalled him on a whim, but she had full faith that he wouldn't hesitate if she did.

"I've got a lot saved up for you, Toots. You ready for a ride?"

They entered the bedroom and he gave the door a shove to close it. After scooping her legs from under her, it took him two strides to reach the bedside where he tossed her down to the mattress.

"You're stalling, Hotshot," she said, pouncing to her knees and whipping her top off over her head. "Get your dick over here now, and I'll take exactly what I need."

Tuck stripped down at the same time she did, racing her to naked. "You're not going to outlast me, Toots."

"We'll see about that," she said, leaping up off the bed and into his arms.

They lived their lives in a power struggle with each other. It was yet to be determined which of them was actually the dominant one. Maybe that was because the truth didn't really matter as long as they were together.

The way he kissed her told her so much about his mood. When they came together after spells apart, their unions were frantic, and this time was no different. Laying her on the bed, Tuck suspended his weight above her, except she didn't want that, she wanted to feel the full length of his ravenous body stimulating every part of hers.

Biting his lip to get his attention, she smiled at the glare he returned. "You're holding back," she teased. "Get with it."

"Oh, I'm with it," he said, seizing her waist and rolling their bodies over to put her in the dominant position. "You could work a little harder."

If he was trying to rile her, she'd take it. After half a decade together, she had nothing to prove to him between the sheets and there were few surprises. But she had what she wanted, control over the body that starred in her fantasies.

Working her hips until his dick was nestled deep between her folds, she pinched and rubbed her nipples, stopping when she wanted to slide her hands over his ripped torso. There might be no surprises, but that didn't mean there was no effect. He'd been working hard on his body since they saw each other last, leaving her curious about where he worked out and if he did it alone.

With her nails, she stimulated his nipples, then let them glide down to circle his belly button, before taking them lower. But when she tried to slide her hips away, he caught them and raised her up, and the head of his erection followed. She'd tested his patience long enough, just as she knew she would. Kadie had pleased herself in front of him before, and he loved nothing more than watching her hands go from her tits to his torso.

This time, he pulled her down onto him and there was no more teasing, he was all the way inside and after a satisfied exhale, she laughed. "Doesn't it feel good to be home, Hotshot?" she asked, rocking her hips, relishing his intimate occupation and reminding him of the warm constriction she provided.

"It sure does, Toots," he said, flipping them over in a slick maneuver that allowed him to begin pumping into her before she was even flat on her back.

Sex with Tuck was different every time and exactly the same as well. Their connection, the security, it heightened every luxurious stroke of his powerful shaft that demanded satisfaction through to his soul.

Kadie wanted to be fucked by him, wanted his body to take advantage of everything hers could offer. But the speed of their union slowed and when she released her lip from her teeth and opened her eyes, she saw him staring down into her, still moving, but preoccupied by something that wasn't the pleasure of sex.

"Tuck?" she asked, touching his face.

Taking her wrist, he moved her palm to his lips and kissed it in a long tender moment that re-inspired the concern she'd sidelined earlier. When he released her, a new determination took over his expression and his actions. He was thrusting harder than before, faster. So fast that it only took a minute more for them both to come together, panting and shouting for each other in ecstasy.

He was here, he was home, and when he took her into his arms and kissed her again, Kadie didn't want to think about anything negative. Being his girl had its disadvantages, but they were all erased in moments of post-coital bliss like this one.

Whatever was bothering him, whatever was different, they'd deal with it, she'd always be here for him and he kept coming back, proving that he knew he could rely on her. Even when they fought and teased, it was submerged in love, they had real, unshakable security, maybe all he needed was a reminder that no matter how much she riled him, she loved him even more.

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