

An excerpt from *After Hours*, by Cara McKenna, published by Penguin / Intermix

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It was Sunday, my night off. I'd survived a first week that felt like an entire month, passed a pretty lousy birthday, and been cussed out by more belligerent men than I cared to count.

"What goes with a black eye?" I mumbled, perusing my choices. I settled on my nicest jeans and a dressy charcoal top. I'd bought that top when I'd sensed this guy from one of my night classes was on the verge of asking me out, excited to go on a rare first date. He never did ask. I found my scissors and clipped the price tag from the collar.

I put on far more eye shadow than I normally would have, hoping to camouflage my damage. In the end it didn't do much aside from make it appear that I was trying—and failing—to look seductive, which was the last assumption I needed Kelly making about me.

At six twenty-five I slipped into a pair of flats and locked up.

Kelly was punctual, already leaning against his hood in the circular drive in front of the apartments. He'd worn jeans as well, and a fatigue-green tee shirt faded nearly to sage. For once his arms weren't crossed like a shield, but braced behind him. He looked as relaxed as I'd ever seen him. He gave me a little nod as I trotted down the steps. There was summer in the air, a warm breeze that reminded me of broken teenage curfews and a hundred once-favorite songs and forgotten crushes.

He nodded. "Evening."

"Hey." I stopped a few feet in front of him, glancing demonstrably around us. "Gorgeous day."

"More gorgeous still, that we don't have to spend it in there." He nodded across the road at the Larkhaven gates, then stood up straight and went around to open my door. "You look nice."

I glanced at my top. "I thought the gray would bring out my bruise. How's your temple?"

He pressed the white bandage. "'S fine. Ready to go?"

I nodded and slid into the passenger side.

"Where are we eating?" I asked him as he started up the truck.

"There's burgers and that kind of shit at the bar, and an Italian place, and a taco place."

"Don't tell me I actually get a *say*? Kelly, you spoil me. Next I'll get to pick my own drink."

He smirked at me then pulled us away from the curb. "You're feisty tonight."

"Funny what getting punched in the face by your own car does to you. And burgers are fine." Burgers and dim bar lighting to hide my eye, and a place I'd be able to call familiar after this second visit.

"As you wish."

"We're not messing around tonight," I informed him as we reached the main road.

"I never mess around. I'm all business in the sack."

"Seriously. I'm not doing a thing with you tonight. And if I change my mind—

which I won't—I'm counting on you to be gentleman enough to respect the wishes I'm laying out right now, in this truck."

"Fine. Not tonight. That leaves plenty of other nights."

I sighed, watching the woods slip past and spotting a deer frozen amid the maples. *Run if you're smart, honey.* I glanced at the hunter in the driver's seat. *Too late.*

We shot the shit about our days off, and Kelly told me a bit more about the city when the fields fell back and mummified factories and mills rose up from the horizon. He parked in front of Lola's, in the very same spot as the last visit.

Again, the place was bustling despite it being a school night. We took seats at the bar and Kelly leaned over the counter to grab me a menu.

"Seems busy for a Sunday," I said, scanning the fare.

"Unemployment breeds boredom, breeds alcoholism."

"That's very cheerful, Kelly. Thank you."

The bartender came by and Kelly looked to me.

"I'll have a light beer, please." I said it perkily, with a big smile in Kelly's direction. When the bartender left us to pour I asked, "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

He shrugged. "I'll pick my battles." He said it in a cocky, lazy way that implied those battles would most definitely be waged betwixt my spread thighs.

Our beers arrived, and I ordered a cheeseburger and onion rings.

"So," he said. "Who gave you that shiner? What's his name?"

Marco lived forty miles away on the other side of Larkhaven, but I wasn't giving Kelly a scrap to go on.

“I’m not telling you. Bad enough *I* get dragged into my sister’s drama. I don’t need my coworkers joining the party.”

He raised an eyebrow at me, irises motley neon once again. “That all I am to you? Your coworker?”

“What would you prefer? Friends? Mentor and student?”

“Lovers?”

“More like dodged bullets.”

“You can’t dodge me forever.”

“Watch me try,” I told him, and sipped my beer.

Amused, he shook his head. I stared at him while he drank. *He really is handsome, once you get used to the scars and catch him smiling. I really would like to sleep with him.*

But bossy prick or not, Kelly was good enough a guy that my head would get all murky, if we fucked. I’d get a crush on him, no matter how passionately I swore to myself I wouldn’t. And once he pounced, brought me down, sucked the marrow from my bones and licked his fingers clean, then what? A prize won, more likely than not. A box checked. And his lost interest would hurt all the more, because I’d have seen it coming a mile off. *Run, little deer. And keep on running.*

Our food arrived before long. My burger tasted like pure, meaty, cheesy decadence after a week’s worth of frozen dinners nuked in the crusty communal microwave. I caught Kelly eyeing me and wiped the mustard I felt at the edge of my mouth. He licked the same spot on his own lips, a subconscious-looking reflex.

“Jesus, you’re sexy when you eat.”

I had to stifle a laugh to keep from spitting out my food. I swallowed and took a drink of beer. “It’s a hell of a burger. It’s literally the most delicious thing I’ve eaten in months.”

Kelly licked his lips again, gaze falling to my lap for the briefest moment. The gestures murmured words his lips withheld. *Bet you taste just as good. Why not come home with me and spread those pretty legs and let me find out?* And for a few seconds the burger turned to cardboard, all my focus lost in imagining being devoured by Kelly’s brazen mouth. That first evening we shared a drink at this bar, I’d probably have assumed he was of a douchey persuasion that didn’t reciprocate, downtown. But that night in my bedroom had taught me Kelly would be only too happy to contradict any assumptions I was tempted to make about his sexual agenda.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I warned him, the beer making me bold.

“Look at you how?”

“Like I’m wearing edible underwear, and there’s a place card in my panties with your name on it.”

He leaned in closer, and God help me, I could smell him. He smelled like beer and sin and rumpled sheets, like every bad decision I’d never made, with a whiskey chaser. His eyes were steady. Cold as ice, hot and dangerous as a brush fire.

“What?”

“Come to my place, some weekend.” His voice was low and deadly serious.

“What for?”

“Sex.”

I snorted. “Don’t be coy now, Kel. Spell it out for me.”

“Come to my place and be mine. For a weekend.”

“What? Like a carpet shampooer? You’ll have to put down a deposit.” I reached for my beer, but he took the glass and set it back down. “Jeez.”

“I’m not kidding. I’m asking.”

“Asking, or ordering?”

“I’m inviting you. Come over. We’ll scratch whatever this itch is we’re both dealing with.”

Itch scratched, curiosity satisfied, waning interest imminent the second he comes . . . and my soft female heart still invested, no matter how much detachment I swore to myself I’d muster.

Was that such a high price to pay, though—a minor broken heart? In exchange for possibly mind-blowing sex? I’d never had mind-blowing sex before. I’d had good sex, romantic and tender and occasionally pretty passionate, but I knew just from looking in his eyes that it had been the minor leagues. And I hadn’t been called off the bench in ages . . .

Still. “No, thank you. We don’t even get real weekends. We both work Saturdays.”

“Next time we got two days off in a row, I mean.” That would be this coming Thursday and Friday. “And why not?”

“I’m not as simple as you. I don’t want to have a one-night stand with someone I have to see twelve hours a day at work.”

Stony faced, he wiggled a pair of fingers. “Two nights.”

I sighed, and this time, he let me sip my beer.

He leaned on the bar, arm flexed, head resting on his hand. “I know you feel this, too.”

“If everyone acted on every impulse they had, we’d all be obese and syphilitic and a hundred grand in debt from the home-shopping channel.”

“When’s the last time you spent a whole weekend just fucking?”

I laughed. “Never. Who does that?”

“We could.”

“That sounds very . . . abrasive.”

“Sex doesn’t have to be some chore you do on Saturday nights after your husband rubs your feet. Come over, and let me show you a good time. Lemme have my way with you, like in your bed the other night. Was that really so bad?”

My traitorous lady-parts gave an eager squeeze, and for a split second, I felt my gaze turn glassy and unfocused as I remembered the mean, rough thrust of Kelly’s thick cock between my thighs. He caught me.

“See?”

I wasn’t sold yet, but I *was* curious. “Have your way with me, you said?”

He nodded. “Just let me be my bossy, demanding self, and I swear you won’t regret a second of it.”

“Bossy how, exactly?” He’d been that way when we’d messed around and I couldn’t say I hadn’t enjoyed it . . . but he meant something else, I could tell. Something more. “Like, rough me up?”

“No, not really. I like it rough, but not any more than a woman wants. I just like doing what I want, when I want. Without permission, in the moment.”

I frowned at “without permission” and it wasn’t lost on him.

“Nothing you’re not up for, or into. I just like issuing orders and having them followed, and taking what I want.”

“How would you know I was up for it, if you just took whatever, the second you felt like it?”

“By talking to you beforehand, like this. And picking a signal or a safe word, so you can pull the plug. It’s the illusion of control I want, not actually forcing anyone to do something they’re not into.”

“Jesus Christ. The last thing I need is to go home with a guy who’s got safe words. Can’t sex just be *simple*?”

“What’s not simple about a single word? Free insurance policy that’ll save you a year of therapy bills, on the off chance I take things someplace you’re not up for. I’ll even let you pick it,” he added, bobbing his eyebrows.

“I’m not interested in sex that comes with a danger of psychological trauma, thanks. I already get that thrill from the ward.”

“I’m a decent guy. You said it yourself.”

“I believe you’re a trustworthy enough man.” I trusted him with my safety, after all, twelve hours a day. “But I seriously don’t see what’s in it for me.” I pictured his body, sprawled across my covers. *Liar*.

He smiled at that. “You think that when I say I like getting whatever I want, that a woman’s pleasure isn’t one of those things?”

His answer gave me pause, and Kelly’s grin deepened. That smile, rare as a rainbow. It softened his hard features and faded his scars, made my heart feel swollen in my chest. Damn him.

“Didn’t I make you feel good, that night in your room?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “You did.” Twice. But I resented the hard sell, having a man trying to talk me into something as personal as sex.

Kelly’s gaze shifted past my shoulder as he thought. “Think of it like this.” His eyes swiveled back to mine. “When I say I want to possess a woman for a day, maybe a whole weekend, it’s like I’m inviting her to a dinner party. I’m making exactly the food I want, serving the drinks I like, planning everything. But she’s the guest. Just because I’m in charge doesn’t mean I won’t serve her a damn good meal.”

I shook my head.

“What else would you do with your time off? Babysit?”

“Probably.”

“Think about it. An entire two days without being asked to make a single decision.”

I gave him a dry look. “Two entire days taking orders for someone else’s enjoyment.”

It was Kelly’s turn to sigh. “Okay,” he said, holding up in his hands in surrender. “I’m not going to bully you into it—”

“No, I’m sure you’d save the bullying for once I was at your place, ready for my glamorous weekend as your sex slave.”

“Jesus, you need to get laid.”

Exasperated, I slid my nearly cleaned plate toward the taps and stood, but Kelly grabbed my wrist and tugged me back to sitting with a jolt. I shot him a glare. *You did not just do that.*

“Listen. I like you. And I want you. I’m inviting you to come over so we can explore the thing that’s between us. I know you feel it, same as me. I’m offering you a chance to shut your brain off for a weekend, so we can spoil each other’s bodies rotten. Let me boss you around and I promise you’ll find out I give twice as good as I get. I’m not gonna try to fuck your ass or dress you up like a hooker—”

“Be still my heart. Kelly Robak, you charmer, you.”

“There’s four things a real man has to be able to do for a woman.”

“Exactly how many man-lists do you have?”

He let my wrist go and ticked the items off on his fingers. “Fix her car. Grill her a steak. Kick the ass of any guy who makes her cry. And fuck her so hard she wakes up half-crippled.”

“Oh my God.” For a moment I just blinked at the gall of him. “You’re . . . You are *ridiculous*. Goodnight, Kelly.” I got up, heading for the exit. I realized my mistake a millisecond before he called me on it.

“Said I can fix your car, not teleport it from two towns over.”

I swiveled. “I’m sure a real man can call a woman a cab, can’t he?”

Kelly stood. “This city’s got exactly one cab, and that’s its driver.” He pointed to a supremely drunk man slumped beside the video poker machine.

I sighed. “Fine. Take me home, then.”

“As you command.”