

Excerpt

Signaling for Rescue: “You Only Want to Scare Her”

Kevin decided that driving Jane insane was the best way to get rid of her. He wanted her to think that every move she made might blow up in her face. And who was she going to tell? Not his dad Mitch—she wouldn't risk pricking their sweet bubble of love. Besides, Mitch would have no time for her stupid little fears. Kevin was pretty convinced she'd stuff it all, which was exactly what he wanted.

His friend Ginevra got credit for the idea. They'd cut out of rat-faced Kane's lecture on Michelangelo's Medici tombs—all that crap about the statues representing Night and Day. Night wasn't even a woman—only some guy Michelangelo wanted to lay. Kevin knew this from his father—*Mr. Renaissance Art*—and it was one of the only things out of Mitch's mouth that Kevin believed. The breasts told it all: baseballs pasted on a linebacker's chest—any fool could see that, but people would overlook a lot when it came to a big-shot artist.

Kevin couldn't take another second in that room of tombs, smashed up against his note-scribbling classmates, listening to junk he'd learned years ago during one of his father's rambling monologues. He and Ginevra had ducked into a *bar-gelateria* serving some nasty neon-colored gelato, but that didn't matter—escaping Kane's lectures was good enough.

“So tell me about this girlfriend of your dad's,” Ginevra said.

“Nothing to tell.”

“How did they meet?”

“At my mom's deathbed.”

“No . . . really?”

“Really.”

Her eyebrows lifted, but her expression stayed flat, which Kevin loved—nothing shocked her. It was as if she'd lived a whole lifetime in fourteen years and knew the coolest way to act. Every guy at the American School had his eye on her as she walked through the halls aloof and unfazed by situations that sent other girls over the edge. Kevin related this to her being half-British on her mom's side. Her voice never got high and trembly, her eyes never welled with tears. She didn't smile a lot, but when she laughed her mouth stretched wide to show some of the best teeth he'd seen on an Italian. He'd feel the jealous stares of other guys as he and Ginevra whispered at the back of the classroom or ate lunch under a shady portico, as if a freshman had no right to steal her time. For some reason she liked to be around him, and for a while he got a

break from thinking about his mom. He never fooled himself into thinking that he was in her league—he'd seen twenty-year-olds come on to her. But that was okay. He'd take what he could get.

“So, what was she doing with your mom?”

“She was her nurse.”

Ginevra rolled her eyes and plucked a cigarette from her pack. “Bitch.”

“I wish I could get rid of her.”

“So do it.”

“Right.”

“Don't be weak. Think of something.”

Kevin focused on her glittering navy-blue nails as she lit her cigarette. “Like arrange an accident?”

Ginevra laughed. “Oh please. Be a little more creative than that.”

“I don't want to talk about this.”

“You give up too easily.” She squinted and took a drag on her cigarette. “I have an idea. Are you going to listen?”

“Fine. Go ahead.”

“The most important thing is to make her life miserable. Play tricks on her. Hide her clothes and earrings. Take things out of her wallet. If she has glasses, steal them. Toss her lipstick behind the radiator.”

Kevin brightened. “Go on.”

“Don't go overboard so that she thinks you're involved. You only want to scare her, make her think something's wrong with her mind.” She pointed a forefinger to her temple and circled it in the air.

“Not bad. How did you think of it?”

“This old movie I saw. But the main thing is never to let on that it's you. Otherwise it will backfire.”

The more Kevin thought about it, the better the plan seemed. It was the best thing he'd heard in a long time. It might even be fun—playing games with her mind and striking the jackpot when she fell apart. It would be a challenge to balance driving her nuts without going overboard, but it would be worth it. He could think of nothing he wanted more than to scare her, really terrify the mouse so that she didn't know her own mind.

Kevin took the bus home and tried to think of a way to avoid running into Jane and his dad. He knew it was useless, since they parked their butts on the terrace of Casa Colonico every

night to suck down a bottle of wine. They would gaze out at the garden as if they'd never seen a shrub before, Mitch with his running commentary on the students up at the main villa, the *little bohemians*, he called them. He'd rant to Jane about their selfish, erratic behavior and stress his need to unwind and absorb the honeyed light of the Tuscan landscape. This made Kevin want to throw up on the Tuscan landscape.

Kevin cut through the entry hall of the villa and walked out onto the stone terrace. There was Mitch, tiny and squat in the distance, lounging in his chair while lecturing to Jane, who nodded like some spring toy. Kevin started up the trimmed path and his father shouted, "Kevin, come and sit down!" Mitch beamed. He couldn't remember his father looking that happy around Kevin's mom, ever.

"Tell us about your day," Jane piped up.

Both Jane and his dad raised their glasses to toast him. Kevin stopped and stared until both of them looked away.

"*Salute!*" Mitch finally said. He took a sip of Chianti. "Breathe in that crisp October air!"

Jane bobbed her head up and down.

"Yeah, whatever." Kevin kept his distance from the wrought-iron table.

"You're late." Mitch said.

"Missed the bus."

"There's lasagna for dinner. It's your favorite, right?" Jane said.

Kevin made his face as dead as possible and he felt her wither. She looked like a kid, even though she was twenty-eight. Some people might have thought she was pretty, but she was so blank-faced and obvious with her fuzzy cloud of blonde hair mashed down by the headphones of her tape player. Whenever Kevin saw her, she had the things on and was mouthing stupid phrases from her Berlitz tapes, "*Dov' è il telefono?*" or "*Scusi, Lei ha una sigaretta?*" She destroyed the accent and Italians gave her blank stares whenever she opened her mouth. She tried so hard that Kevin thought she might pop a blood vessel. He loved it when she dangled there, humiliated, but it was never for long because Mitch always nosed in and fixed her mistakes and she'd give him this melting look that said, *You are my prince*. Kevin saw Jane as a librarian in a nowhere town, or maybe a receptionist in some dingy office, but never as a nurse on an oncology ward, which was her job when she met his dad.

"How was school," Mitch asked.

"Same."

"The same? Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"Forget it." Kevin headed for the door.

“Can’t you sit down for a minute?”

“I’ll be right back.” Kevin went inside, dumped his books on his desk and collapsed on his bed. Lasagna! What a moron. He closed his eyes and realized that he’d have to eliminate the surly attitude—especially with Jane. He’d have to begin the sweet-boy act if he was going to avoid being suspected as her tormenter.

That night Mitch insisted that Kevin sit in the staff dining room just off the huge room where the students ate. At least once a week his father made this request and Kevin always tried to ditch it at the last minute. This time, though, when Mitch knocked on his door and asked him to join them, Kevin called out, “No problem.” Why not start now? Now was as good a time as any. He needed to begin racking up trust points from Jane. Trust was key. But he would have to start small, not go overboard with phony, extreme actions. Build from the bottom. He would pass her the salt or something. He would sit next to her. That would be enough.

Kevin arrived and Mitch was already at the table twirling the stem of his empty wineglass between his fingers. Jane played the slave as usual, fetching him a carafe of red wine from the sideboard. Kevin went for broke and sat down next to Jane’s empty chair.

“Hello, Kevin,” Jane said. She settled into her place and Kevin inhaled her sugary perfume that reminded him of Froot Loops. He felt her stiffen, bracing for some kind of attack.

“Hey, Jane. Dad.” Kevin reached for the bread and poured some olive oil onto a small plate.

“So, is now a good time to ask about your day?” Mitch shot Kevin his monkey grin.

“It was fine. Aced a math test.”

“Great job! That’s excellent.”

Kevin stuffed a hunk of bread into his mouth.

The baronessa walked in and called out, “*Buena sera!*” She smiled at the three of them. “Kevin! What a surprise!”

Kevin laughed. “*Ciao bella.*”

She winked at Kevin and he could tell that she was half in the bag from her vodka. He liked her. She came at you like a hand grenade. Most people had no idea what to make of her—especially Mitch, who described her as an aging American debutante in need of detox. But she was nice and would do anything Kevin asked. “And how are you this evening, dear Jane?” she asked, pulling out a chair.

Mitch scowled as Kevin poured the baronessa a big glass of red wine.

“Good. Very good. I took the bus up to Fiesole and wrote in my journal practically the whole afternoon. It was incredibly relaxing. I almost fell asleep!”

The smile froze on the baronessa's face. Kevin shot her a look that screamed, *You get it! You see what a fool she is!* But the baronessa missed his message. Instead she glanced up and waved at Dr. and Mrs. Berto coming through the doorway.

"Good evening, Domenico, Elena," Mitch said.

The Bertos said hello and sat down across from Kevin and Jane. They resembled one another, both small-boned and pale with gently waving silver hair. Two sweet gray mice. The Bertos were from Rome but had lived in Evanston for over twenty years, where Dr. Berto taught history at Northwestern. Since Mitch taught in the art history department, the two had only gotten to know one another on this trip.

Kevin knew the Bertos didn't like his father especially since Kevin had confided in Mrs. Berto one afternoon in September three weeks after he arrived in Italy. She poured tea as they sat in the kitchen of Casa Colonico. Kevin ate anise cookies and told her about his mom dying in February and how Jane and his dad had hooked up right away. Then he dropped the bomb: Jane had been his mom's nurse. Kevin watched Mrs. Berto's face go flat. She put down her teacup. Finally she spoke up and asked him if he felt all right spending the year in Italy, away from home and his friends. The sad expression on her face unnerved Kevin, so he lied and told her that he was excited. He gave her all the crap about the beautiful women and awesome racecars, but the heartbroken look in her eyes did not change. So, he'd made an excuse about needing to pick up some medicine for his father and got out of there.

Elena dished up plates of roasted chicken and vegetables for everyone. Jane picked at her food—she seemed nervous with Kevin so near. While that was fine with him, it wasn't going to help his plan. So that night while Jane and Mitch were in the city for a movie, Kevin headed for their bathroom. She'd been wearing her funky black wire-rimmed glasses at dinner and the idea for his first little trick skated easily into his brain. He discovered her contact case in the medicine cabinet of their bathroom. He unscrewed one of the covers and spotted the dome of plastic bathed in its tiny pool of solution. He nudged it and it adhered to the tip of his finger. He walked to their bedroom and placed the case on her bedside table, another little touch, just to throw her. Then he went outside into the garden and held up his finger with the contact poised. By now it was dry and hard. He stopped in front of Jane's favorite rose bush and blew the contact into a spray of fat peach blooms. That was it—so simple. He felt a blast of joy.

Early the next morning Kevin heard Jane in the bathroom—he knew it was her because she took forever to get ready. Today she took even longer. The sound of the medicine cabinet opening and closing filled Kevin with excitement. Then the bathroom door burst open and her determined footsteps pounded the tile on their way to the bedroom. Voices. Bingo—she found

the case. He heard her say something, poor baby. He guessed her words: “I left it in the bathroom. Did you move it?” Mitch grumbled something, annoyed that she’d disturb him with such an insignificant thing. One more trip to the bathroom to juice up the contact. But the contact was gone! More ransacking until finally she gave up. But Kevin knew it would continue to bother her. Jane never did things mindlessly. Even the simplest action, like ordering a cappuccino, was a big production—*senza schiuma*, without the froth—making an idiot of herself by attempting to act like a native. Best of all, Kevin knew that her obsessing over a measly contact would irritate Mitch.

Kevin got out of bed and considered the crack he had engineered. They were not quite as happy as they had been the night before and it was because of him.

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