

Chapter 17: Did You Love Him?

ETHAN

I was left speechless, imagining how she must look in that lingerie. I had already pictured it the day Zoe insisted she open the box in front of me. But my imagination couldn't come close to the experience of seeing her wearing it in person.

From that moment, I knew I'd do anything for her to let me see what was under that dress.

"Are you really wearing that under this dress?"

She lowered the menu on the table, staring at me. I wouldn't be able to focus on anything else now, and keeping my dick under control took a lot of concentration—exactly the opposite of imagining how she'd look in that black lace.

"That's what I just said," she replied, just as the waiter approached our table, asking if we had decided on our orders.

I needed something strong. It was already hard enough seeing her in that dress and maintaining control. Her long, toned legs looked incredible in those black heels. I almost begged her to give me a twirl, just so I could get a view of her ass in the dress.

I didn't like the direction things were heading; she was almost making me beg. I needed to level the playing field between us.

I knew our provocations were a good path to getting what I wanted, but

she was proving to be more resistant than I'd thought. I needed to come up with something—and fast.

I waited for the waiter to take Miss Brown's order and then placed mine, finishing with a bottle of whiskey.

"Is my company bothering you?" she asked as soon as we were alone.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"If you need something as strong as whiskey."

"You can be annoying, Miss Brown, but your company would never bore me."

"Was that supposed to sound like a compliment?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Then you should've left out the part where you called me annoying." She shrugged.

She really could be annoying, in a way that got under my skin.

"Have you ever had a boyfriend, Miss Brown?"

I tried changing the subject. Could we even have a normal conversation?

"Why are you asking?"

I took a deep breath, trying not to lose my patience.

"Are you going to ask why every time I ask a question?"

"Shouldn't I? I need to know why you're interested."

If I'm asking, it's because I want to know about you. Feel free to ask me anything about myself—as long as you answer my questions, of course.

"Are you trying to get close to me to seem like a nice guy?"

God! I'd probably use a gag on her when I finally had her in bed. The thought calmed me down a bit.

"I'm starting to think it's impossible to have a normal conversation with you."
"

"Sorry if I think you're just looking for a way to get me into bed."

Enough. She was pushing it.

"Let's make something clear... you know what I want, so I don't need to pretend to be something I'm not. Understand that? I'm just being myself, so you can see I'm not just a complete bastard like you think. It's the only thing I can do to try to get what I want. See that?"

"Why are you spending so much time and effort on this?"

How could she even ask that? Did she look in the mirror often? Any man would kick his own balls just to have her.

"Because I want to, and I'm a spoiled bastard used to getting everything I want."

"I'm sure you've been disappointed a few times. That's life; we don't always get what we want."

"And what do you want, Miss Brown?"

She took a deep breath, thinking before answering.

"Right now? To get rid of you and the other jerks who keep coming back into my life."

I didn't like how she lumped me in with other men who had been in her life. I wasn't responsible for whatever they'd done to her. But I understood that those bad experiences left scars.

"Are you talking about your ex who came back to town?"

She had mentioned it yesterday.

"I wish he'd just come back to town. The bastard is now living in the apartment next door."

"Your ex is your neighbor?"

Why did that bother me like an itch I couldn't scratch?

"He's not my ex-boyfriend. Actually, to answer your question, yes, I've had a boyfriend. But it wasn't Todd. Although what we had functioned like a relationship."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"We had an exclusivity agreement, but he never... well, you know, he never officially asked me. I don't know why I'm telling you this."

I could see the hurt and sadness in her eyes as she spoke, even though

she avoided looking directly at me. Was it possible she still liked the jerk? And why did seeing her like this bother me? Maybe because I only knew her strong, determined, and even aggressive side.

"Was that a long time ago?"

Maybe I could find out if she was still in love. If she was, it would make winning her over much harder.

"Yeah, it's been a while." She shrugged.

"How long?"

"Over a year. Almost two, actually."

"Did you love him?"

I don't know why I asked that. Maybe it was just genuine curiosity.

"Who are you? My therapist?" she asked with a smile, but before that, I could see the pain in her eyes.

Whoever the jerk was, she had loved him, and he didn't appreciate it. Damn. I knew exactly what she had gone through. It made me feel like a jerk.

Not that I intended to make her fall for me or lead her on dishonestly. I could never do that to someone. I knew exactly how hellish it was to go through something like that. Contrary to what Miss Brown thought, I always tried to be honest with the women I got involved with.

"Did you just make a joke without trying to offend me?" I asked, trying to

erase the hint of sadness from her face.

"Yeah, and I almost believed you cared about what I was saying," she said, shaking her head.

"I do care."

"Sure." She rolled her eyes with a faint smile.

"I don't like wasting my time on things that don't interest me."

I was being honest with her.

"You know there are plenty of women who would be interested in dedicating themselves to you, right?" she said after a few seconds of silence.

"Yes, and you're not one of them."

"Is that why you're trying so hard?"

"I was already interested before I found out how difficult you can be."

"You're just doing this because you want to win the game. You don't genuinely care. Don't forget, I'm a scientist—I know a thing or two about human behavior."

She was right, at least until a few seconds ago when I discovered she wasn't just an arrogant shrew but also a woman with a difficult past.

That changed some things. I still wanted her, and I still wanted to make her give in, but hearing her made me feel the need to be careful with her

feelings. It also made me more curious about her.

"Where did you study, Miss Brown?"

"Undergraduate at Columbia and an MBA from New York University."

That was surprising. Maybe she had reasons to be full of herself beyond her beauty.

"Wow! Aside from being a scientist, you didn't seem like a nerd—until now. Aren't you a bit young for that?"

She smiled, making me focus on her lips.

"And you, let me guess... Harvard? Stanford? Princeton? MIT?"

The way she seemed genuinely curious and engaged in our conversation excited me.

"Stanford, with a specialization at Oxford."

"And I'm the nerd?" she asked, smiling.

The waiter approached the table, interrupting us. After serving the dishes, he left. I poured the wine for both of us before we started eating.

"I suppose you were born in New York?" I asked.

"Actually, no. California."

"And how did you end up here?"

"For college."

"Alone?"

She nodded.

"I know exactly how that feels."

"How long were you living in London?"

"Six years."

"I've been here for ten."

"That's why you seem like a New Yorker. Do you miss California?"

"Yes, especially my parents. And you, do you miss London yet?"

"Not yet, but I think I will soon."

"Do you plan to go back?"

"Not for now. Maybe in the future."

She nodded as she brought her fork to her mouth for the first time. I had to adjust myself in the chair after watching her lips close around it.

"You asked about my boyfriends; what about you? Have you had many?" she asked, lifting her glass to her lips.

I didn't want to get into that topic; it brought back bad memories I didn't want to relive.

"Just two."

"Well, I confess I expected a higher number. Did those relationships last

long?"

"The first one was a long time ago, back in college. I really don't want to talk about it."

"Of course, I'm sorry. I guess I got carried away. It's not like we're friends or anything."

"It's not that. It's just that... I prefer not to talk about it with anyone."

"Alright," she said, nodding.

Her phone buzzed in her bag, and she opened it, glancing at the screen.

"Excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom," she said, standing up with her bag.

Was she upset? There was nothing I could do about it; I wasn't going to tell her about my ex-fiancée just to make her feel sorry for me. I didn't need that.

My eyes followed her movements as she turned her back to me, finally giving me a view of that amazing ass in that dress. God! I didn't know what to do anymore.

Why the hell had I promised I wouldn't touch her? All I wanted was to follow her to the bathroom and lock myself in there with her. I grabbed the bottle of whiskey and poured myself a glass. Come on, Morgan, think of something.