*Opening*

KAYE

Some mornings everything just goes wrong.

Take, for instance, *this* morning. Not only was I opening at Black Cat Coffee, but I’d have to retrain Jessica. Our sweet, blonde golden girl Jessica. It’s not like she hasn’t worked here for three months already. Nonetheless, Jessica’d gotten so many complaints about her shoddy openings that my boss ordered me to retrain her. Why not just fire her and hire an adequate barista, one might ask? Perks of being the boss’s niece, I suppose.

So now I was up at the asscrack of dawn, pushing out of the train station. Frigid air wafted over my skin as I came to the surface. The air was summer-humid before I stepped on the train for my commute, so the change must signal oncoming rain. I hustled a little quicker down Greenway to Black Cat. Sunrise blurred behind stacks of blanketing clouds.

Coming as a surprise to no one, Jessica was *not* inside. I whipped the keyring out of my tote like some Old Western gunslinger, opening the door with a flourish. As irked as I was to not sight the golden goddess when I’d been called so early to train her, a wave of pleasure washed over me. Opening a coffee shop alone was one of my favorite things in the world.

Cranking up the Franz Ferdinand thrumming in my headphones, I found the lightswitch hidden behind the tall fridge. I plopped my tote on the counter, thrashing invisible drums as I cock-walked to the dish room. Fingertips flew, flicking on taps to fill basins with hot water and dishwashing suds. Each counter I anointed with a full red bucket of sani and a fresh white towel. I unpacked our pastries from the early morning drop with such finesse I’d make a NASCAR pit crew stutter. Finally I sprung open the register and began thumbing through the bills, ensuring they all sat faceup in their stacks as I tallied to make sure the till was at an even $200.

And all of this ten minutes before our 7am open.

God I’m good at my job.

“No need to fear - *Jessica*’s here!”

Popping an earbud out, I withheld a pre-caffeine snarl as I turned to see the lady of the hour. Jessica strutted in from the back entrance, shaking her drenched umbrella out onto our previously-dry wood floor. One more thing to take care of.

“Did you know it was going to rain this morning?” Jessica whined. “I am *drenched*!”

So absorbed was I by actually opening the place that I didn’t notice it had begun pouring outside. “Well I’m glad you’re here!” I quipped, snatching a Wet Floor sign from the side closet and placing it over her umbrella mess. Sarcasm was never one of Jessica’s strong suits, so fortunately I could say whatever I liked around her. Good thing, because she made me feel some rather *strong* emotions.

“I’m glad I’m here too!” She flashed a blinding-white smile. “Now, how can I help open?”

My jaw ground in thought. “I think all we have left is dialing - ”

A series of booms broke the patter of rain on the window, causing me to jump nearly three feet in the air. Both Jessica and I whipped our heads around to the front door where a figure loomed outside. That was the last thing we needed - an early bird.

“Jesus Christ,” I exhaled.

“Aww,” Jessica pouted. “He’s getting soaked.”

“He sure is. Now if you don’t mind - ”

“Kaye, how can you *leave* him out there?” Jessica asked.

Measuring out the morning roast and pouring it into the coffee grinder, I sighed. “Because it’s eight minutes till we open. He can wait eight minutes.”

“But - poor thing!” Jessica leaned against the counter, sipping her illicit Starbucks. “And not a bad-looking poor thing either.” All I could tell from the deluge was that the figure was A.) a man & B.) definitely tall. Maybe one of the waterslides down the windows made him look handsome to Jessica. For all I knew he was a cryptid.

Shutting the grinder lid, I flipped the switch and ground. I raised my voice to Jessica over the din. “If you let him in this time, he’ll expect it *every* time. I don’t care if he’s Timothee Chalamet or Mothman. He’s got to follow the *rules* like everyone - ”

My blood pressure spiked as I heard the bell chime over the front door. Whirling about with my shaker full of grounds, I witnessed Jessica welcoming the tall stranger in with open arms. As she chatted up the wet dog shaking himself over the threshold, a crowd of umbrella-d old ladies materialized through the storm from behind him and shuffled inside.

Taking a deep breath, I shook the grounds into the drip filter and started the morning brew. I’d have to snap on my customer service face earlier than usual, it seemed.

“Excuse us,” the eldest lady called from the counter. “We’re in a bit of a hurry, if you don’t mind serving us?”

I summoned all the strength I possessed and stepped to the front, taking their orders one by one. “Where are you all headed on such a rainy day?” I asked, a genuine question. From the way they were dressed it looked like they were all headed to a yoga retreat for skeletons.

The same eldest spoke up. “We have strength-training classes across the way.”

“So Kick It Fitness finally opened, huh?”

The oldster gave a minute nod, the only indication she’d heard what I said. “Did you make sure those were all *decaf* lattes? We can’t *have* full caf!”

My eyes sped over the receipts where I’d written “DECAF PLEASE GOD” in all caps. “Absolutely, ma’am. I’ll get right on that.”

Jessica, who’d been flirting with the cryptid at the door, suddenly teleported next to me. She practically body-checked me with her hip in front of the bar. “Kaye, I *gotta* serve him. I get him a drink this morning, then he’ll get me one tonight.”

Not entirely opposed, I slid behind the coffee bar. I’d rather be here than serving the man who’d ruined my morning. Dialing in the tricky decaf espresso on the fly, I peered outside through the rain. Kick It Fitness sat right across the street from us, a row of treadmills gleaming in the window. After weeks of the world’s loudest construction they’d finally opened. Now we’d be serving beefheads on a daily basis. I wondered if they’d ask if we could add protein to their drip.

After slinging out more than six decaf lattes for the biddies, I put all my attention into the oat milk latte Mr. Cryptid ordered. It wasn’t what I’d envisioned cryptids ordering but to each their own, right? Years of barista-ing came to me at that moment, allowing me to steam the tricky milk with ease. Going low then high then low again, I topped the latte with perfect peacock feather art. I needed to take a picture of these to add to my collection -

Before I could blink, Jessica snatched the latte off of the counter. “Wow,” she mused at my art. “Thanks, bestie. *More* than happy to take this out.”

In one swish of her hips, Jessica walked my perfect latte over to the Jersey Devil. “Made this just for you,” she cooed.

Actually, from where I stood, I saw the cryptid better resembled Bigfoot. His enormous frame early reached our rafters with the top of his head.

At Jessica’s words I saw a smile flash from behind Bigfoot’s long, soggy curtain of shoulder-length hair. All this made me want to put the steam wand in my mouth and pull the trigger.

A familiar van screeched to a halt out front. That’s when I remembered the lack of a cake box in our pastry order this morning. Rushing out from behind the front counter, I booked it to open the door for a drenched Ricky, holding our illustrious cake.

“Triple - triple - *chocolate*,” he gasped. A trail of rain water ran off Ricky’s baseball cap onto the box. “Sorry again. The box should keep it safe though. Made to keep water out and flavor in.”

I received the triple chocolate cake with open arms, admiring its heft. This was the pride of my day, this thick, dark cake, vegan simply because it was baked with an amount of oil that would make BP jizz their pants. “Thank you, Ricky,” I replied sincerely. Because this cake was my salvation. This cake, after every shift, managed to retain one deliciously-chocolatey piece. If any kid remained in the Black Cat, or some particularly dejected coffeeshop screenwriter, I’d give it to them, no charge. And if some customer really speared me in the taint that shift, really raked me over the coals, I’d claim the piece for myself. I thought of every time I’d scarfed down my daily slice during closing as I turned on my heel, spiriting the cake back to the counter where I’d remove it carefully from its box -

But the cake never made it.

As I turned, a massive Bigfoot materialized before me. I sprung up at the sight of him, shooting my arms in the air and sending my chocolatey goodness to its doom. The cake box flipped in mid-fall, lid cracking open. I watched in horror as the chocolate cake landed, icing-down on the floor, with a soul-shattering *splat*.

A pathetic wheeze escaped me. This was it. This was the first time I’d have a panic attack.

“Hey, hey,” a man’s voice soothed. “I didn’t know - I didn’t - ”

Bigfoot’s hand fell on my shoulder, completely dwarfing it. I clicked my gaze up to a face curtained by wet hair. This man was truly huge, with ice-blue eyes and knitted eyebrows. His lips pulled to one side, revealing a dimple that cut so deep into his cheek that I thought he’d bleed. Despite his concerned expression, his stature looked like he could hurl me through a wall. A shiver ran down my spine at the notion.

“I didn’t,” he went on. “I didn’t know you guys served *cake*.”

My gaze fell to the abomination on the floor. “Not today we fucking don’t.”

I felt the huge man studying my face with an intensity that would scorch me out of existence if I looked up. “Are you the Black Cat?”

My blood pressure spiked again at this ridiculous notion. “*What*?”

“Cause I’m Leo.”

He offered an oven mitt of a hand. Above the wrist this man was absolutely covered in muscle, ones swirling over and gripping his already enormous bones. Before I knew what I was doing I’d given him my hand, which his absolutely consumed. Who knew the sight of Bigfoot and a frail barista making a business deal over a dropped cake would be so heartwarming?

“Listen,” the guy went on. “I - I would stay and help. Really. But I needed to be at work - *five minutes ago*. So sorry, B.C. Promise I’ll make it up to you.”

My mouth hung open. I knew my lips formed a perfect “O”, like the mouth of a thoughtless goldfish. My two brain cells struggled to rub together as I watched Leo lumber past me to the door. Leo’s hand dwarfed his oat milk latte, making the 12 oz. cup appear like a meager cup of espresso. His calf muscles stood out like sharp-cut rock, and his leg hair was thick and dark as his eyebrows, glinting with early morning rainwater.

Why the hell was I fixating on his leg hair?

“Kaye, can you come show me where the “add espresso” button is?” Jessica called from the front counter. Her acrylics snicked futilely over the POS screen as a businessman tapped his foot. “Also, do you know what a “pink-eye” is?”

The world swirled around me, from the demolished cake at my feet to the bustling café of biddies around me. I’d have to clean this up, shoveling cake with my bare hands into the trash can. I’d also have to help Jessica at the front. But I couldn’t just leave this cake here. I had to clean it up before one of the yoga skeletons ate complete *shit* –

Through it all – the rain, the old women, the general chaos – a light flicked on. Kick It Sports illuminated in a blaze of glory as they opened for the morning. I recognized Bigfoot by the light switch all too well, waving at me as he sipped my oat milk latte.

*Leo*.

What the fuck??

LEO

The elderly woman in front of me pushed through her knee-ups, jaw set with determination. Above her iron-gray eyebrows sat a terry cloth headband, catching her sweat.

“Excellent form, Doreen,” I encouraged, watching her descend with the two-pounders clenched in her tendoned hands. “You’re getting better at this every week.”

Something resembling a blush rose to the apples of Doreen’s cheek, but she waved it away as she planted her feet on the ground again. “Oh, you’re just saying that.”

I gave her a sincere look. “You know I’m not.” I’d poached most of my gym clients from my previous journey as a personal trainer. I’d worked at established gyms - Spectrum, Planet, Anytime, even Equinox - and grown my contacts list. Did I know most of my Rolodex held women? Yes. Were most of them over fifty years old? Also yes. I chalked it up to my maturity and go-get-em attitude. Doreen *did* mention she loved my gumption.

I led Doreen through a series of cool-down stretches before bidding her goodbye so she could enjoy her free Sunday. I, on the other hand, perused my gym like a nervous animal.

*My gym*. It felt crazy to even think about it. After years of honing a gym habit of my own and transferring it to others as a PT, I’d graduated to the next step. There was a sizable crowd of older women in on Kick It Fitness’s first day open, most of them walking at inclines on the treadmills. A balding gentleman, who’d divulged to me he was a divorced dad, considered breaking in our weight machines. He approached them with trepidation, so I greeted him with a grin and gave him some tips on the leg press. I delighted in his true smile revealing itself like the sun through rain clouds.

Screw it - this was an *amazing* first day. Sure, people weren’t lining up around the block to get into Kick It Fitness, but I wasn’t selling Apple products anyway. Before I could help it, my mind started converting each client into a dollar amount. If Doreen got a membership for herself and her four friends, plus the training session today, that would mean -

*I should check my bank account. Just in case.*

Soon enough I was pulling it up on my phone. There were the costs I’d carefully calculated. Above them in red hovered a $20 withdrawal from Marcus.

Heat flashed through my chest, but I bit it back. Marcus was my older brother even if he stood nearly a foot shorter than me. In order to open Kick It, our parents would loan me the money on two conditions. One, I had to hire Marcus to work at the gym with me. Two, I had to open a joint account with him to supplement his income. It's not that *I* wasn’t good for paying a direct deposit in time. The issue was my brother - who I loved ever since we’d been in diapers - couldn’t hold a job down to save his life. He was always after some new get-rich-quick scheme that would flush his dollars directly down the toilet. Our parents had the thrilling notion to kill two birds with one stone - help me open a business and help my brother keep his head squarely on his shoulders. Ideally.

So Marcus, as an account holder of our joint bank account, had this fun habit of randomly withdrawing money from the account without considering my budget and without *telling* me. The idea of someone just taking money out randomly when I’d just opened a business -

As if my thinking had summoned him, Marcus appeared around the corner, gym bag slung over his shoulder. He was draining a protein shake, late as always.

“Hey man,” I called to him. “What’s up with the $20 missing from the account?”

Marcus barely looked up from his phone as he tapped away. “Sorry, man. Harper’s birthday coming up soon. Wanted to get her something*.”*

Harper. My heart warmed at the mention of her name. We had plans to hit the beach later today. She’d glide along the paved path while I suffered on a run in the heat. I didn’t mind, as long as I could see her for a bit.

“Okay,” I reminded Marcus. “Just next time *tell* me, okay?”

My brother gave me what passed for a nod as he sauntered over to “inspect” the free weights. Deciding to pick my battles and appreciating that Marcus was even present on our first day, I retreated to my office. It always made me nervous to check my account knowing he did shit like this. But knowing it was for Harper, I’d let it slide today.

Today I was supposed to be proud of myself. Anything I did today would be forever cemented in my memory as what I did the first day Kick It Fitness opened. I glanced around my tiny office, wishing a “First Dollar” would manifest. I could frame it. But no one carried cash these days anyways.

My eyes landed on the coffee cup on my desk. Damn good coffee. I removed the sleeve stamped *Black Cat Coffee* and pinned it next to my desk monitor. Next best thing to a dollar.

I needed to thank that barista from Black Cat too. What a perfect latte to start a perfect first day. In my opinion, there was nothing better than a coffee made by an expert barista.

Rifling through my desk, I picked out a tip for Jessica. It wasn’t much, but it was the best I could do. I sealed Jessica’s tip in an envelope, scribbling her name on the front.

I’d have to do something for that Black Cat girl too. After making her spill the cake she’d been carrying and her fiery dark eyes clipped up to mine –

Shame filled me for making her day harder, but it was quickly replaced with an odd sensation. There was something about those sharp, precise lines of her features, the way her jaw worked. Her face arrested me more than made me feel afraid.

The tips of my index fingers poked the envelope’s corners. Black Cat was tiny but - damn. That girl certainly made me feel something immense.

KAYE

Out of the corner of my eye I tracked Lipstick Lady as she hovered by the counter. Her hands clasped each other in unsuccessful self-restraint as I busted through a huge to-go order. Once I finished an iced mocha, I swirled it and placed it on the counter, calling out for Susan. Lipstick Lady gestured at the drink with a manicured claw.

“This isn’t what I ordered,” she sneered.

“Correct. That’s Susan’s order.” I watched Susan nudge past stalwart Lipstick Lady to retrieve her drink.

Lipstick Lady pressed on. “*I* ordered a dry cappuccino - ”

“That’s what I’m working on right now, ma’am,” I chirped with artificial sweetness. “Bone-dry. I know how you like it.” The milk screamed as I frothed it mercilessly, as if it was being tortured. All I could think was *I feel you, buddy*.

After appeasing Lipstick Lady with her dry cappuccino, I wiped the slick of sweat off my forehead with the back of my wrist. Today, for the third day in a row, Jessica was out of action. For the past two days she’d called off two minutes before her shift. Her complaints ranged from exhaustion to general malaise. But today pissed me off more than anything. She was a no-call no-show, forcing me to work not only opening but her closing shift as well.

With thirty minutes left in my shift, I embraced the lull in customers to begin furiously cleaning the espresso machine. There was no way I’d made good tips today despite being slammed. My only hope was Lipstick Lady, but I knew that despite her exacting order she never tipped.

As I timed backwashing the portafilters, a notification sprang up on my phone. It was from Jessica. I read along in increasing anger as she detailed:

*So sorry – forgot I was working today! I’m at Burning Man for the rest of the week :( Hope it’s not too much of an inconvenience.*

I took such a deep, cleansing breath that air singed my nostrils. *Fuck* her. Fuck Jessica. And fuck this terrible day of doing all her dirty work for her.

The universe granted me the reprieve of no customers for the rest of my shift, so at least closing went quickly. I fished a five-dollar bill out of the tip jar. As I broke it into singles, the envelope in the cash drawer caught my eye. Jessica’s name was scrawled on the outside.

It had been a solid week since Jessica passed off my oat milk lattes as hers to the gym bro. That same day Leo-Bigfoot had come in to leave her this tip. I informed Leo that Jessica had clocked out for the day but I’d save it in the register for her next shift. I resisted the urge to tell him that putting a tip in an envelope made it look more like a threat or a stalker letter.

Yet now the enveloped tip looked up at me as seductively as an envelope could manage. Despite working all day I knew I was still broke as a joke. That, and Jessica ditched me for Burning Man. My moral compass of keeping her tip safe corroded as the days wore on. And I’d had about enough.

Snatching up the envelope, I slammed the register shut. I left through the back door, clicking the light switches off.

Summer humidity swallowed me on the way to the train. How much had Leo left Jessica? I thought of it the entire ride down. He worked at, potentially *owned* Kick It, so maybe he was some endowed gym bro. The only thing saving him was the fact he didn’t wear a baseball cap. All those signaled to me big fraternity energy.

Getting off at my stop, I weighed the envelope in my hand. It didn’t feel too thick – in fact inside it felt like a card. Maybe he’d left her a Visa. “*Buy yourself something cute*,” he’d probably written on the card. “*And meet me at Sterling Bar on Friday. There’s more where this came from*.”

I shook my head as I pushed into the coolness of my apartment. I had to stop fantasizing about those billionaire romances TikTok recommended me.

Phlox, my huge gray cat, met me at the door. He bumped into my legs like a battering ram. I needed no help tripping into bed, however, allowing myself to fall there like an exhausted tree. Phlox hopped up to make biscuits out of my stomach with his oversized white mitts.

My curiosity couldn’t wait any longer – I had to see what this tip was. Ripping open the envelope right above Jessica’s name, I reached my fingers inside.

All I drew out was a punch card for eight free personal training sessions at Kick It Fitness.

“*Here’s my number*! :)” Leo had written. “*Text me when you’re ready to start*!”

Smothering my face into my pillow, I screamed.

(From Session Five: Get Your Protein after a vigorous workout…)

LEO

“Rough day?” I tried. I figured the less syllables the better as I fought for breath.

Kaye mirrored me in quad stretches, gripping her ankle and pulling her foot to her ass.

“You could say that. Better now. Nothing like being covered in sweat to make me forget all about that.”

“You’re telling me,” I replied, feeling where my tank had stuck to my back. “I went from boxing this morning to going on a walk with Harper. Nearly lost track of time! Now I’m here with you. All sweaty again.”

Something ticked in Kaye’s face when I mentioned Harper, but it might’ve been a trick of the light. “You box?” she asked. “I feel like there’s definitely a connection between Leo the high school football player and the WWE fighter you’ve become.”

*Yeah. Anger issues*, I wanted to tell her. Kaye plopped down next to me in the functional training area with the rubber floor. Usually this area was filled with yogis or our older clientele, but at this late hour we were the only inhabitants.

“If you’re ever interested I could train you in some self-defense,” I offered. “Now I do jiu-jitsu and some krav maga. Used to dabble in high school wrestling - ”

Kaye let loose a shrill laugh that sat me up straight. “I can see you in a leotard now. You must’ve looked *super* cool.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think the leotard had some components you’d really enjoy.”

Kaye’s inky brow nearly shot into her hairline. “Like what?”

“Single shoulder straps. *Very* tight, black, and fashionable. I was a young Andre the Giant in my day.”

Playfully, Kaye swung a punch at me, connecting her fist with my shoulder. Though it was in jest, it still stung.

“Wow,” Kaye chided. “If you were a real fighter you wouldn’t let me lay a *finger* on you.”

Irritation sparked at me, low, rumbling and electric. “Seems like you want your training to start right now, B.C. You want that?”

Her eyes flickered to mine, viperlike. “You got it in you, old man?”

Swift as a whip I grabbed for Kaye’s wrists. Just as quickly she jerked back from me, evading my grip by mere centimeters. Surprise lit up her face along with vicious delight.

“Real fighting isn’t just clean hits and dodges,” I instructed, rising to my feet. “It’s messy and difficult. Are you prepared for that?”  
 Kaye mirrored my rising, tongue darting across her lips. “Ready for anything you throw at me, *coach*.”

Usually HIIT workouts wore me the hell out, especially when I was matching my client’s energy. But something about Kaye threw on a switch inside of me. I was going to *take her out*.

Quickly I reached for one of Kaye’s hands that swung nervously at her sides. This time I nabbed it, enveloping her entire wrist with my fingers. Kaye attempted to wriggle away from me but I kept my grip vice-like. “Keep your hands up,” I coached, firmly guiding her hand below her knife-sharp chin.

As her other hand moved up to imitate the one I’d placed it took everything in me not to meet Kaye’s gaze. But I gave in, as I always did, luxuriating - if only for a moment - in those warm brown eyes. Like chocolate. Like mahogany. Like -

*Get it together, man.*

I moved my hand from Kaye’s wrist to the tops of her hands. I realized she was trembling. Running my fingers over hers, I guided them to curl into fists. Kayes hot breath skimmed over my knuckles, making my heart drum like a manic hammer.

“Protect your face,” I murmured. I reached across Kaye’s body and touched her hip, guiding it behind her body. My thumbs pressed into the spot right beneath her hip bone, while my fingers splayed across her hip, feeling where bone shifted into the fullness of her curves. God, her very presence was testing me not to devour her right then and there.

“Shift your body to the side. Less real estate to land hits on,” I explained. “Now you can show me what you got.”

A sudden burning thwack as Kaye’s fist connected with my left pec. Landing it seemed both to surprise and delight her. She drew her fist back, shaking it off like my muscle hurt her too. “Stop flexing and take your own advice,” Kaye taunted breathlessly.

*That* was it. She was going to get it.

The second Kaye took another swing at me, I took hold of her upper arm, pulling her backwards into me. As she attempted to wriggle away from me I made my grip tighter.

“This is a hold,” I whispered against Kaye’s ear. My lips brushed it as she struggled, and I felt her ear hazed with peach fuzz.

“I - *gathered*!” Kaye huffed, fighting not to sound irritated. She danced to step on my feet but I pinned her between the muscled columns of my thighs, flexing them tight.

“Clearly I don’t need to teach you everything,” I growled. “You’ve already landed two hits on me already. C’mon, B.C. Show me how you get out of this one.”

Sharp pain knifed back into my ribs. I released Kaye, stumbling back and gripping the place where she’d jabbed with her elbow.

As soon as she was out of my grip, Kaye sprinted back and around me. In my periphery I watched the girl hop up onto the stack of training mats behind me. In one swift movement she launched herself onto my back. Kaye’s arm hooked around my neck. I managed one last gasp before the arm tightened into a chokehold, cutting off my air.

“You’re making this…too…*easy*!” Kaye declared, enveloping my waist with her legs. She clung to me like some psychotic spider monkey. “Tell me - *if* you can - what is the prize for the winner of this fight?”

After flailing fruitlessly to dislodge Kaye from my back, I dropped heavily to my knees, causing my competitor to plant her feet on the ground in surprise and ease up on my windpipe. I took the opportunity to dig my fingers under Kaye’s chokehold and pry her loose. She let me go, throwing me off-balance.

Discombobulated, my large form teetered backwards to the ground. Kaye looked over me for one moment before launching herself on top of me, pinning me to the rubber in a full mount.

“The prize,” I announced as my opponent straddled me, “is a shower in my office’s personal bathroom. You and I both need one after this.”

Throwing her head back, Kaye erupted in that sparkling laughter of hers. “I’ll be sure to leave the water ice-cold for you, coach.”

Before my brain could even comprehend that I was escaping to top position my body launched into motion. Reaching up, I grasped two fistfuls of Kaye’s T-shirt at level with her collarbones. While she was distracted, I thrust my hips up, sending my smaller opponent squeaking into the air. I wretched Kaye’s form right and down, navigating my hands and hips until I was in a full mount on top of her. Once Kaye’s body was caged on the rubber beneath me I gazed triumphantly into her dazzled dark eyes.

“Trust me,” I gloated, “I’m taking my water *hot*.”

Snarling, Kaye began to beat against my chest with her fists. I took both her wrists, slamming them crossed to the rubber above her head with just one of my larger hands. To keep the pressure on her wrists, I had to shift my knee back, resting some of my weight onto her.

“Tell me you yield to me,” I demanded. I felt Kaye squirm beneath me, every part of her crushed to my front.

“Fuck - *no*,” Kaye spat into my face. I actually felt her spit flicker across the flushed panes of my cheeks. Decided, I dropped the full weight of my hips onto her in retaliation. Christ, I felt her tits press up into my chest, those firm perky little things. And oh, I felt her soft stomach writhe against my undeniably hard cock as she fought me.

No hiding how I felt any longer. Was Kaye fighting me because of the hardness pressing against her, or was that eagerness in the breath panting against my neck?

“*Yield*,” I offered. With two flimsy layers of clothing between us I knew I couldn’t last much longer.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Kaye hissed. “Is that what it takes to be your good little girl? Take you till…I can’t fucking take you anymore?”

Every one of her words made me throb harder. She wasn’t going to win like this. Shoving both my knees back, I made her take my whole weight. Breath squeezed out of Kaye’s lungs, and I released her hands to bolster my arms on either side of her. I didn’t want to break her damn ribs. I just needed her to yield to me.

I snapped my eyes down to hers. Kaye’s eyes, always alternatingly teasing and shy, peered up at me with a new emotion. Something high-emotioned, pleasure or pain or both, pulled at the corners of those eyes, as if forcing them open while gazing into the sun. Kaye’s mouth hung open, gasping, those perfectly soft lips agape, exposing the indecent pink of the inside of her mouth, her quivering tongue. Most intoxicating of all was the heat I felt radiating from between her legs, grinding up against my hardness ready to erupt -

One of Kaye’s freed hands slapped to the mat at her side twice, the move for tapping out.

“I yield,” she wheezed from under me. “G-god *damn* it, I - y-yield.”

Immediately, I drew my knees level with her hips and pushed myself up off her. Kaye inhaled fiercely, eyes rolling back into her head.

“You put up a hell of a fight, B.C.” I conceded. I drew myself up to standing and dusted off my rumpled top before extending a grip. “Want a hand?”

Kaye shoved herself up to standing before me, knees wobbling. “Sorry, but I don’t take handouts from *cheaters*.”

I withdrew my hand as if I’d been stung. “Who are you calling a cheater?”

“You,” Kaye accused. “You’re a heavyweight and I’m *clearly* a lightweight. We’re in completely different categories. You have an unfair advantage.”

I scoffed. “You agreed to the fight, little one. Sorry. You lost fair and square.”

“You fight dirty,” Kaye sneered.

“So do you, sweaty. But I won so…I get to shower off first.”

Leering down my long nose at my defeated opponent, I trudged to my office. While I’d beat her at the fight she’d nearly made me ruin my shorts. I wasn’t so sure who the real winner was here.

KAYE

Energy prickled at my skin from our heated exchange earlier. Not surprising, since “earlier” meant five minutes ago when Leo headed into the shower in his office, leaving me with my sweat drying in the blast of the gym’s air conditioning.

Minutes dragged on this state. I swore no one took showers this long. Surely Leo was doing this to taunt me. This was just another time he enjoyed the comfort of a hot shower while I lurked outside waiting for…*something*.

But today I was simply not in a waiting mood. Leo had caused me to tap out with the sheer weight of his body. If that was fighting, then planking was a martial art. And I’d had about enough of that.

Sparking with fury, I strolled into Leo’s office. He’d left the door to his personal bathroom cracked open, allowing steam to waft out. A feeling of deja vu overcame me. I hesitated on the threshold until my eye caught a bit of cardboard taped to Leo’s computer monitor - a brown sleeve stamped with the logo of Black Cat.

My eyes hovered on the coffee sleeve, feeling how it filled my stomach with brazen courage. It didn’t take that much before I’d eased the door further open and stepped onto the warm cream-colored tile inside.

I marveled at how cute the compact bathroom was. After the encounter with my own workplace airplane bathroom earlier, this one shone like a gem. Furnished with warm tiles, it was lit with cozy golden lights more suited for a spa. This was a far cry from the harsh fluorescents screaming down from the gym ceiling.

Then familiarity flooded me as I breathed in the scent of Leo’s earthy body wash.

I couldn’t help but remember the last time I’d observed him in the shower, and the very thought of it made me bold.

“I have a proposal for you,” I called out, just louder than the running water. Sitting down on the spare dark wood bench in the bathroom, I untied my shoes, removing both those and my socks.

The rhythmic sound of washing stuttered at my voice. I couldn’t help but notice the sound of running water sluicing off a body and imagining quite fervently what that naked body looked like.

“A proposal? Sorry to disappoint you,” Leo called back, amusement coloring his words, “but I am married to my work.”

“Listen - I am not *that* desperate,” I huffed. Standing, I rolled down my leggings, leaving them in a pile on the floor. “I wanted to see this bathroom you keep bragging about but…that shower barely looks like it could fit one person.”

A laugh rang out at my blatant lie. “Not from my perspective. Could fit two. Even three, but it’d be a little tight.”

Peeling off my shirt and then my sports bra, I savored the warmth of the room.

“I think I’d like to test that theory. I’m cold enough out here as it is.”

“Didn’t I warm you up enough already?”

Naked, I felt surreal approaching the shower. My hand paused on the curtain. I heard my mouth ask, “Not enough. Sorry. Can I come in?”

For a moment my entire being hung suspended in the air, between the tightrope swings. Why had I just said that? I wish I could formulate an answer better than the slickness between my thighs that remained from when Leo pressed me with his weight, making me say exactly what he wanted to hear…

It took me a moment to realize Leo spoke, his words coming to me on a delay. “Yes.” That one word contrasted huskily against the humidity if you’d like. “If you’d like.”

No further persuasion required. I pulled back the shower curtain just enough to step inside. And I saw absolutely all of Leo.

(Continued in *The Punch Card*)