

*Last Minute*

*By Alisha Rai*

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“Hey there, stranger.”

Warm lips nuzzled at her neck. Kira Cole tilted her head to the side to enjoy the sensation. “Stranger is right. Who is this man, accosting me while I’m doing my laundry? It couldn’t possibly be my boyfriend. I haven’t seen him in two weeks.”

He spun her around and backed her into the nearest dryer in the deserted laundry room. She accepted his hungry kiss with a sigh of arousal. David Campbell had been haunting her fantasies since he’d moved across the hall from her nine months ago. He’d been making those fantasies come true since she accepted his first invitation for lunch three months later.

And her fantasies weren’t exactly tame.

“I just turned in the manuscript. Will you forgive me for ignoring you? Please?” he murmured against her lips.

She tried not to roll her eyes. Lately, David had taken to apologizing profusely every time he ran late or needed to work. Kira had been confused until his sister dropped some hints to shed light on the matter: apparently,

his last girlfriend was extremely high-maintenance, prone to hissy-fits when she felt ignored.

Kira didn't mind his absentmindedness that much. The man more than made up for it. After all, sometimes things kept her busy, too. As a writer, he had deadlines; she understood when he needed to work and not be interrupted. "I told you, its fine."

A frown crossed his face. The navy button-down he wore brought out the stormy blue of his eyes and complemented his natural tan. With his strong features and athletic body, the man was an obvious hunk. The glasses perched on his nose hinted at his true nature, though: closet nerd. The dichotomy made her shiver. "I'm sorry anyway."

"Forget about it. Oh, Happy Valentine's Day."

His body stiffened against her. "What?"

She tried to hide her smile. "You forgot?" Personally, she didn't see how anyone could forget the commercialized holiday. However, she worked at a lingerie store, where red hearts had been shoved down her throat since Christmas.

"Hell, no."

She chuckled. "Yeah, you did."

David scowled down at her. “That’s what you think. Come over to my place. Half an hour. I’ve been planning this romantic night just for you.”

“David, its okay...”

“Hush. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Bemused, she watched him leave the room. *This ought to be good.*

Thirty minutes. David stared at the clock on his microwave. He had thirty minutes to plan a romantic evening for the woman of his dreams.

What could he make quickly? When he was working, he tended to exist on frozen dinners and canned food. He opened his fridge door and then slammed it shut again. Disgusting. He also forgot to clean when he was under deadline. In the freezer, he scored with a pre-cut frozen loaf of garlic bread. Pasta and sauce were staples he always kept handy. He breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing was more romantic than Italian, right? Low budget Italian, admittedly, but Italian nonetheless.

David fumed as he put a pot of water on to boil and popped the bread into the oven. How the hell could he have forgotten Valentine’s Day? When he and Kira had started getting serious, he’d programmed every important date he could think of into his PDA. His absentminded nature

was his worst enemy—he didn't want to do anything to mess this relationship up.

*She won't leave you because you forgot one stupid holiday.* No, but what about next time? Or the time after that? How long 'til she decided he wasn't worth her trouble? No other woman had ever mattered to him as much as Kira.

He poured a box of pasta into the boiling water, put a lid on it, and turned the heat down. With the food issue resolved, he considered his next problem: where could they eat? It would take too long to clear the dining table of all of his paperwork.

The couch would work. He snagged a couple of garbage bags. In the small living room, he proceeded to fill them with socks, newspapers, candy wrappers, marbles—why were they here?—and every other piece of junk cluttering the surfaces.

*Candles.* Kira loved the things. Leaving the bulging bags on the floor, David looked around the room. He didn't own candles.

No, wait, he did. He opened the cupboard under the entertainment center. A trio of dusty fat pillar candles sat next to a pile of DVDs. His sister had bought them for his dining table, but they kept getting in the way. He

grinned as he set them on his newly cleared coffee table and lit the wicks.

Who said he couldn't find anything in his mess?

He kicked a stray magazine under his couch as he crossed over to his stereo. Three stations later, the soulful sound of jazz filled the small room.

The door bell had him groaning. Damn it, he could have used a little more time. Unlike him, Kira was a punctual little soul. "Just a second," he yelled, as he grabbed the garbage bags of miscellaneous clutter. He didn't have a choice but to toss them into his bedroom and close the door tightly.

He dimmed the lights before opening the front door. She'd changed from her pajama bottoms and t-shirt into a pair of jeans and a v-necked red sweater, which clung to every voluptuous curve. Her hair was loose, the dark waves falling down her back.

Her big brown eyes gleamed in the dim hall light. "Hey."

The adrenaline in his system eased, calmed by her presence. "Hey." He leaned down to press a kiss to her nose. If he touched her lips, he wouldn't stop at just a kiss. His body ached for her.

She offered him a chilled bottle of wine. "I just happened to put this in the fridge earlier. Lucky, huh?"

“Absolutely. Come on in.” She walked past him, and he tried, really tried, not to stare at her ass. He could never get enough of it.

“Do you hear something?”

Crap. “The pasta.” He darted to the kitchen, knowing it was too late.

Sure enough, water had boiled over the pot onto the range below.

He turned the burner off and lifted the lid.

“It doesn’t look too bad.”

He turned his head to find her peering over his shoulder. “It’s mushy.”

“Put some extra sauce on it. No biggie. Do you have some in your fridge?”

“No!” His shout stopped her with her hand on the door. The biohazard inside his refrigerator was not something she needed to see tonight. “I mean, I can get it. Why don’t you grab some glasses and the wine and go sit in the living room? I thought we’d eat on the couch. More intimate.”

She shot him an odd look, but left the small kitchen. David worked quickly to get the food onto two plates. He opened the oven, and breathed a sigh of relief. The butter on the bread looked nice and melted, and he put

the pieces onto another plate. He arranged everything onto a tray before he made his way to the living room.

The mellow light bathed her beautiful features. "I have to say, I'm impressed with how clean your place is. Last time you had a deadline, it looked like all your closets exploded in here."

"I know how you like everything tidy." He placed the tray on the coffee table.

"I didn't know you even owned any candles." Kira touched the side of one and then drew her hand back.

David inwardly groaned when he noticed her subtly wipe her fingers on her jeans. He should have dusted the things off. Time for a distraction. "Yeah. Hey, I hope you're hungry." He sat down next to her and arranged a piece of garlic bread on each plate. Kira accepted hers with a murmur of thanks.

He almost gagged on his first soggy bite. "Just so you know, this is special pasta. Very expensive. It dissolves right on your tongue."

She swallowed. "Huh. It's good."

David picked up the bread. His teeth bit into a solid core of ice. "Damn it!" He tossed the bread back onto the plate and put it back onto

the table. Without asking, he took her plate away as well. For a second, he stared at the flame of the candle, and then sighed. "I forgot it was Valentine's Day, okay?"

*"No."*

*"Yes. I'm sorry."*

Her snort of laughter caught him by surprise. When he looked at her, her eyes were filled with mirth. Another giggle escaped the hand she clasped over her lips.

He scowled. "It's not funny. Yell at me. Call me a jerk. Get it out of your system."

Kira sobered immediately. She clasped his face between her hands. "You are not a jerk. I've certainly never felt like you take me for granted. You were working. Life gets in the way sometimes, it happens to me too."

He leaned his forehead against hers. "I'll make it up to you, I swear. I had already planned to take you out to a nice place once I got my advance."

"Well, I won't protest, if you insist," she said, smiling. "But Valentines isn't a huge deal to me. Work through my birthday or our anniversary, though, and I will expect some sort of acknowledgement, buddy."

*"Fair enough. I don't know how you put up with me."*

She kissed him, her lips soft and welcoming. “Because I know you care for me a lot. You probably haven’t slept in days, and you still tried to put something together here. I’m touched.”

“Care, hell. I love you.”

She pulled back and stared at him, obviously stunned. “You’ve never said that to me before.”

“I’ve never said it to anyone.”

“Wow.” Kira smiled slowly. “Of course, I love you, too. You know, you didn’t have to make dinner. That just made my day perfect right there.”

He wasn’t feeling too shabby either. Especially when her tongue came out to play, turning their kiss from sweet to steamy. David caught her hand just as it reached his belt buckle and reluctantly pulled away. “I really like where this is going, but my bed is covered with all the crap that was in here. Do you want to move this over to your place? I can bring the super-classy store-brand cookies I have in my cupboard. I’ll even let you eat them off me.”

She laughed. “Sounds good. Blow out the candles and grab the wine.”

