

KIRA

THE ACTRESS EXITS THE THEATER IN TEARS.

It takes her a few seconds to realize she has an audience. My audition is the last of the day, so I'm the only one left waiting in the row of mismatched chairs set up against the lobby wall. When our eyes meet, she takes a small, hiccuping breath, choking back her emotions like vomit.

I don't remember her name, and I'm not sure she ever knew mine, but we did a play together once. Years ago, one of my first jobs in Chicago. She was the heroine, and I was the slut who seduced her boyfriend. (It wasn't a very good play.) I've seen her a few times since then, on posters for shows at Lookingglass, the Goodman, Steppenwolf—the type of theaters I can't afford to go to unless I know someone who can hook me up with comp tickets.

She was always so poised, one of those classic ingenues with perfect ballerina posture. But right now she's a wreck: shoulders hunched and shaking, lightning-strike lines of mascara cutting down her face. She didn't just lose it on the way out, after the audition was over. No, she's been going for ten minutes, minimum. Which is about the same amount of time she was inside the theater.

What the hell happened in there?

Before I have a chance to ask, she hurries toward the door, ducking her head so her hair sweeps across her cheekbones like closing curtains. Even the sweltering wind blowing in from the street outside can't stop me from shivering. As if I wasn't already nervous enough about this damn audition.

The door separating the lobby from the theater swings open again, and a dark-haired young girl wearing crooked cat-eye glasses comes out. She stops on the threshold, holding the door ajar with her hip, and looks down at the clipboard in her hands.

"Kira Rascher?"

Here we go. Whatever went down in that room, it's my turn now.

I hand her my stapled-together headshot and résumé, and she stacks them on top of the clipboard. Her fingernails are bitten down to the quick, what's left of them covered in chipped black nail polish.

"After you," she says.

The temperature inside the theater is at least a ten-degree drop-off from the lobby. All my exposed skin—arms, shoulders, the sliver of leg bared by the slit in my long skirt—prickles with goose bumps. The lights are on full, but the black paint on the walls swallows up their brightness.

The Indifferent Honest Theater Company is a typical Chicago storefront theater: a former retail property hollowed out and turned into an intimate performance venue. *Intimate*, of course, meaning claustrophobic. The space holds fewer than fifty seats, and the stage is just a scrap of bare floor in front of them.

Sitting dead center, a few rows up, is Malcolm Mercer—the man I'm here to see.

It's so surreal to be standing here in front of him, for him to play the role of spectator. We've spent hours together in this room, but this is the first time I've ever seen him out of character. Last time I saw him perform, he had his hair buzzed short to play a soldier with PTSD. It's growing back in now, long enough to show the curl in it again, but he used to wear it even longer, skimming his jaw. He'd use it almost as another prop, raking his fingers through it, flipping it out of his eyes, seizing it at the root.

In addition to directing, Malcolm plays the male lead in every Indifferent Honest show—the perks of being artistic director. The play I’m auditioning for is a two-hander, so if I get the part, he’ll be both my boss and my sole costar.

Intimate indeed.

Only his eyes move, tracking me as I take my position at center stage. You’d never guess he’d just witnessed—or maybe caused—an emotional meltdown. He seems entirely at ease, legs crossed at the knee, steepled fingers resting on his thigh.

The clipboard girl tries to hand him my headshot, but he ignores her. The blond woman sitting next to him—Executive Director Joanna Cuyler, the other half of Indifferent Honest—takes it instead. Joanna is intimidating in her own way, with her razor-sharp bob and wide-set feline eyes. She spends a few seconds glancing from the picture to my face and back again, like she’s checking my ID at airport security, before tucking it under the spiral-bound notebook in her lap.

Malcolm’s lips are slightly pursed, as if he’s on the verge of speaking, but Joanna is the one who prompts me to begin. “Whenever you’re ready, Ms. Rascher.”

There’s a certain facial expression I’m used to seeing in audition rooms: a mask of polite detachment, not quite bored, but not too interested, either. That’s the way Joanna looks at me when I start my monologue.

But that’s not how Malcolm looks at me.

I’m being ridiculous. Of course he’s staring at me, I’m standing on a stage doing a monologue. He’s paying close attention to my audition—it’s his job, for fuck’s sake.

But I’ve done hundreds of auditions, far too many of them for creepy assholes who leered at me, asked me to twirl, bend over, take off my top. And none of them ever looked at me the way Malcolm Mercer is looking at me right now.

His gaze is hard. It has weight and heat, and it seems to touch my whole body at once. I’ve known since I was thirteen what it feels like when a man mentally undresses me, and this is something else.

It's like he's stripping off my skin instead of my clothes, peeling it all away so he can see the blood and bone and sinew underneath. So he can expose every piece of me.

I reverse two words of one line and stutter over another. A drop of sweat traces a jagged path down my back despite the chill. My voice is getting higher, smaller, a tremor under every syllable knocking the words off-balance. The pressure of his stare feels like fingers around my throat.

This fucking bastard. I had him all wrong. When I walked in here, he wasn't relaxed. He was coiled, lying in wait. He must enjoy this—making people uncomfortable, pinning them down like specimens in a display case and watching them squirm.

Well, if this is how he made the last girl cry, it's not going to work on me. Crying is easy. Anyone can cry. Hell, I've been able to make myself do it on command since my first acting class. The more he stares, the more I want to get through my monologue just to spite him.

So I do the one thing you're never supposed to do during an audition: I stare back.

At least it's in character, since my audition piece is a blistering speech given by a woman who just found out her lover has been cheating on her. I look Malcolm dead in the eye and pretend he's every man who's ever pissed me off. Soon I've lost track of where my simulated rage stops and my actual anger begins. But it doesn't matter, because with each line I'm gaining strength, shaking off his grip. The air between us seems to crackle.

By the time I reach the end, the words are spilling from my mouth like they're my own, raw and real rather than rehearsed. I let a beat go by after the last line, then drop character and lift the corners of my lips, the way I practiced in the mirror at home. My natural expression is the kind that inspires passing strangers to tell me to cheer up, so I have to rehearse my smiles almost as much as my lines.

For the next few seconds, the only sound in the theater is the scratch of Joanna's pen in her notebook. She draws a long line across

the page, emphasizing something or striking it out, I don't know which.

Malcolm doesn't move, doesn't speak, doesn't even blink, so neither do I. I want to look away from him—to look anywhere else, really: the floor, the emergency exit sign, my own feet—but breaking eye contact now would feel like conceding territory, admitting defeat.

It's Joanna who interrupts the silence. She seems to do all the talking around here.

“Thank you very much, Kira.”

She glances over at Malcolm and raises her eyebrows. He leans back a little in his seat. Not a word spoken, but something has clearly passed between them.

Finally—*finally*—his eyes move away from mine, and I feel like I've won whatever strange game we were playing.

But my triumph is short lived. His gaze slides down my neck and along my collarbone, coming to rest on the swell of my chest, and I can feel my smile decomposing.

He's not evaluating my talent or weighing whether I'm right for the part. He's trying to decide if he's interested in sleeping with me.

Fuck this guy. I should tell him off and storm out. I've wanted to do that every time this has happened before. Now is my chance.

When Malcolm lifts his eyes to meet mine again, I'm ready, a whole battery of retorts locked and loaded. But before I can unleash them, he disarms me completely.

“You're bleeding,” he says.

JOANNA

OF COURSE, I SAW THE BLOOD AS SOON AS SHE WALKED IN. A small red streak on her right breast. I'm surprised it took Mal so long to notice, the way he's been staring at her.

"Excuse me?" Kira says.

"You're bleeding," Mal repeats.

She looks down at her chest. So does he.

For God's sake. He could at least attempt to be subtle about it.

I'd guessed that the mark was a cut or a scratch. Then it occurred to me it might be stray lipstick; the color is similar enough to the stop sign shade she has on her lips (a little much, and not just for an audition).

"Oh, that's just—it's stage blood," she says. "I'm a teaching artist. With the Will Power program?"

I noticed that on her résumé. I also noticed she left off the exclamation point at the end of the name. The program coordinator and I dated, briefly, and she always had extra promotional flyers and post-cards scattered all over her coffee table. A creepy cartoon Shakespeare head and the words *WILL POWER!* in cheerful comic-book text.

Now Kira's cheeks are burning almost as bright as the bloodstain. But she doesn't try to cover it up or wipe it away. Mal will like that. He likes her already, I can tell. He liked her as soon as she walked in, before she'd even begun her monologue (which I'll admit was good, even with those minor mistakes at the start). He gets a certain shine in his eyes, like a starving tiger spotting its next meal.

Too bad she's all wrong for the part. I told Mal we should have put more in the audition notice than a gender and age range. He loathes typecasting, but it has its uses. Mara is supposed to be a tight, contained character, full of secrets. Kira is just the opposite: an open book, everything she's feeling at any given moment broadcast in Technicolor across her face. Did she think she was fooling anyone with that rictus of a smile?

And then there are her looks. She's beautiful, to be sure, but in an obvious way. Nearly vulgar. Her long black dress isn't revealing, but a body like hers can't help drawing attention to itself. As she talks, she keeps shifting from one leg to the other, jutting her hips out, which pulls the fabric over her breasts so taut it's practically see-through. She looks like she should be on the cover of a 1950s pulp novel with a pistol in her hand.

"We're doing our *Macbeth* workshop this week," she's saying now—vamping, desperate to fill the silence. "The, uh, dagger scene was today, and I came straight from there, so . . ." I should put her out of her misery. If I leave it up to Mal, he'll let her twist just to watch her unravel.

I raise my hand. She falls silent, but her lips stay parted, showing the wet point of her tongue.

"Thank you for coming in, Kira. We'll be in touch." A polite lie I've told so often, I don't even feel guilty about it anymore.

She smiles again—even less convincing this time. "Okay. Thank you."

I watch her go. Mal doesn't. He keeps staring at the spot on the stage where she was standing a moment ago, as though he can still see her there.

"Was she the last one?" he asks.

“For today. We have a couple more scheduled for tomorrow afternoon.”

We’ve been here since eight this morning, and we haven’t had anything to eat since Mal sent our intern, Bryn, out to pick up breakfast at Chicago Bagel Authority. I’m more than ready for a proper meal. After a day of auditions, Mal and I always go out for dinner and talk through our options. I was thinking La Crêperie on Clark Street, but I’ll see what he’s craving.

Bryn hands me the clipboard with the audition list. She’s done a decent job today, though I’m not about to admit that to Mal. He’s the one who hired her—his idea of helping me, when I made the mistake of complaining about my workload in the ramp-up to the new season. So now, in addition to doing all my own work, I have to supervise hers. But it was a nice change, not having to run back and forth to the lobby and corral all the actors and their assorted neuroses on my own.

Mal wants Bryn to stage-manage, too. He says she has experience. I’m guessing said experience is limited to high school plays performed on a stage stuck to the end of a basketball court. *Temper* isn’t a very complex show, though, from a technical standpoint. One set, minimal props, all costume changes done onstage. She’d have to really be trying, to fuck it up.

“Should I cancel the others?” I ask him.

We may have ended on a weak note this afternoon, but several of the women we saw earlier in the day were excellent. Exactly what we’re looking for. It’s unfortunate about the actress who auditioned next-to-last. I had high hopes for her; she was fantastic in the adaptation of the Persephone myth the Hypocrites did last spring. But someone who breaks down crying during an audition isn’t going to last a minute in rehearsal with Mal.

He stands and stretches, rolling his neck from side to side until it cracks. The hem of his shirt lifts, exposing a strip of bare skin above his belt.

Then he reaches for my notebook. I grip the sides, the metal binding cutting into my palm. But he isn’t trying to flip it open, just

tilt it up. So he can slide Kira Rascher's headshot out from underneath.

He holds the picture up to the light and stares at it for a long moment, his lower lip caught between his teeth. There's a vein in the center of his forehead that always stands out when he's concentrating. Right now it's throbbing, steady as a metronome.

"Sure," he says. "Cancel them."

However much he may have liked her, there's no way he'll pick her. Not for the play, anyway. Mal prefers to sculpt from more pliable material, and Kira Rascher seems like the type who would snap before she'd bend.

The longer he keeps staring at her picture, though, the less certain I feel. Mal can say more with a pause than most people convey with a torrent of words, and usually I can interpret his silences like a second language. But for the first time in the dozen years we've been working together, I have no idea what he's thinking.