

Opening Up

Curiosity

Charm

Thursday • 4:32 PM

Kennedy:

Girl! I have your room ready. Begrudging reluctance it is of YOUR style. Simple normality. XP

PLEASE! Let me add some of my KEN DOLL FLARE!!

Cassie:

NO! I still have glitter from the last ken doll flare

Kennedy:

That has years ago 😬 glitter was the jam back then

Cassie:

Point made. You can glitter bomb your next client's home

Kennedy:



Cassie:

Are you sure it's ok? Promise to find a place to get out of your hair as soon as I can.

Kennedy:

Girl...😬 who you think you're talking to! You stay as long as you need. It's going to be like when we were roomies at St. Catherine.

With a lot less mean girl action

Plus after the wedding I will be off to the beaches of Maui with my sexy wife. You are stuck with my egotistical brother but at least there is an endless supply of wine. 😬🍷

Cassie:

It's his place, right? Will he mind?

Kennedy:

It's the family estate, and he knows the situation. Oliver is actually very chill. But he is my older brother. As the young sibling sibling rights, it is required that I say he is the worst LOL

Cassie:

The situation? Like all of it?

Kennedy:

No! I would never! All he knows is you need a place to crash while you startup your empire 🏰

Cassie:

LOL

Thanks Ken. You're the best ❤️

Today • 9:27 AM

Kennedy:

OMG! I stuck with the florist. Total flower emergency! 🌸💀

Oliver said he will pick you up.

I SO SO SORRY!!!

Cassie:

OH NO! Save those flowers! I'll be ok. About to take off, be there in a couple hours! It gives me time with my new roomie. 😊

Kennedy:

Good luck 😊

I glance at my text thread while munching on a ham and cheese sandwich I got at the airport convenience store. Contemplating if I should bite the bullet and call her. I should have asked for his number then I wouldn't have worried about bothering her. She has been stressing about the wedding, so I don't need to add this detail to her full plate. I'm not sure what he looks like now, He's likely changed a lot since I saw him in the pictures that Kennedy kept on her desk in High School. He looked like a typical rich kid. That was over five years ago. However, judging by his punctuality, he is still a rich brat who doesn't care about anyone else's time. I mean my flight landed two hours ago! I should have ordered an uber or I could have started the process to get a rental. I'll need one when Kennedy comes back from their honeymoon, but that beats the purpose of saving money and the reason for using her car. I need to save every penny to get my business.

My butt is starting to hurt from sitting on the concrete. I refuse to move from the curbside for airport pickup. One, I barely remember what the guy looks like and two, dragging two large suitcases and a backpack around is not fun. I had to lug them around the confusing airport once already. Ugh, this idiot needs to get here. As I'm considering hitchhiking, a massive dark green truck with bold lettering 'Heart's Vineyard & Winery' pulls up in front of me. An equally massive man jumps out and rounds the truck towards me.

When I stand, he towers a few inches over me, which says something compared to my five ten height. "You Cassie?" he questions. Slightly flabbergasted, all I do is nod. He carries my suitcases, sliding them into the truck bed, like they were simple grocery bags. With a slam of the tailgate, he looks over to me. "What are you doing? Get in the truck."

Taking a short breath to calm my nerves. “You really are a twat. You show up two hours late and think I would idly sit by without a proper greeting and apology.” Glaring, I prop my hand on my hip.

I expected him to start bickering back, instead a huge grin broke on his face. “That school needs to reevaluate their principles. Rather than producing graceful ladies, they push out ballsy, wild women.” My frown deepened as he approached me. “Don’t pout like that. I am Oliver Heart, Kennedy’s stunning older brother. You were my pesky little sister’s partner in crime in high school. I apologize for my tardiness, I was at a client event that went over. Now could we please leave before we are late to supper?” He gestures to the truck. He’s wearing a similar dark green polo with their logo that hugs his muscular form and khakis shorts. His cocky grin continues to spread as I walk past him.

“Apology accepted.” I grumble. He laughs getting into his seat.

From tall buildings and busy streets to clear valley hills and one lane bare roads, we drove in with the changing radio station filling the silence for a little over an hour. I was content with it and he seemed to be too. I stole glances at him; he seemed drained and needed the silence. He must be as busy with the wedding as Kennedy is. The sun is still high on the horizon but the sky starts to turn a lovely shade of orange.

He cleared his throat, catching my attention. “You like the views of Cali? Gotta be different from Texas.”

I give a smile. “It is. It feels more colorful here.”

Nodding, slipping back into silence when he doesn’t say anything. Ugh..

“Is everything ready for the wedding?”

He grunts, “Yep, everything should have arrived this afternoon. Even your precious *pergola* has been installed.” He says pergola like it was a word from his fifth grade vocabulary test.

Laughing and ignoring his childishness, “Amazing, I was worried it wouldn’t get here in time. I can’t wait to see it in the wild instead of the workshop.”

“So you really are a handywoman.”

I feel the light in me brighten. “I am. Proud of it.”

“Ken says you are planning to start your own handy business.” There was a small smile on his face. I caught him a couple times giving me a few looks of curiosity.

I press my lips into a smirk. “Cas’s Carpenter and Woodworks,” I announced with pride. “I have everything I need, but clients. However, that should change after the wedding. I have a couple meetings with potential clients booked.”

“Impressive,” he smiles before wavering for a slight moment. “If Ken’s gossip is correct, how did a southern bell heiress become a carpenter?”

“Gosh, how to put this.. I always loved woodwork when I was in school, though it was frowned upon. I entered a few art contests, but I was never any good. It gave me the opportunity to get off campus. During a few shows, I met Greg and Tammy, a sweet couple who love seeing youth blossom.” Warmth fills me as I remember the older couple that changed my life for the better. I reach for the amber necklace they gifted me with a crystallized bee that symbolizes hard work.

“So they saw you, said you're talented, but you say you are not,” he jokes.

“Oh gosh no. My little wood carvings were so amateur that most were used as paper weights.” I chuckle to myself thinking of those carvings of little forest animals. “We became

friends while discussing my work and my future. They run some nonprofits, one of which is building houses in needed areas. A place where I could help and experience something new. I told my family I wanted to do it. They agreed at the time saying it would be good for me to see a different world. They never thought I would fall in love with building and creating.” I pause to look over at him. His hazel eyes capture my attention, urging me to continue. It’s been so long since someone really listened. “Well, one year became five, what most thought was a phase was a career for me. I interned under a few contractors, and I confidently say I’m a well rounded carpenter.” My confidence fades thinking of all the arguments, the dismissals of my own opinion by the ones who should have been my biggest supporters.

“Your parents are helping with the business, but not a place to live. Kinda messed up.” He coldly chuckles.

“My cousin invested in the business. The rest of the money...” I gesture toward myself flippantly. My tone is just as cold as his.

“What?” a look of disbelief on his face.

“The rest comes from me,” I state unabashedly. “Kinda putting my life savings into this. I know it sounds stupid not to have a safety net. If it comes close to me becoming a burden or living on the streets, I’ll go crawling to my parents.” Though it would be the last thing in the world I’d do.

“Are they so against you making a path for yourself, that they would cut off their own daughter?” He snaps. His knuckles tighten around the wheel.

“Technically that wasn’t the main reason, but it didn’t help the situation.”

“What was the situation?” his voice turning colder.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” He opens his mouth to say more but I cut him off. “It’s my situation to deal with. I thank you for your concern and the help you are giving me, but I want to enjoy this weekend. Be here for Ken and Aspen.” I take a few deep breaths. “Maybe after I’ll tell you.” I whisper.

He nods and doesn’t say a thing; his knuckles continue to dig into the wheel.

Our short conversation ended, lucky for me the rest of the ride to the vineyard was short. Its beauty left me breathless, there are acres of grapevines and in the distance a large Tuscan mansion sits on the hill with two smaller ones close by. They glow with the afternoon sun behind them. Oliver parks in front of the mansion and comes around opening my door before I can. “Thank you.” I say as he nods and goes to the truck as he blows a loud whistle with his fingers.

“Maddy!” He hollers as he gets my luggage. He turns to me. “He will help you get these to your room. Dinner is in thirty downstairs, ask Maddy for help if you need to find it or listen for Ken’s loud voice. I got things to do.”

“Wait! I’m staying in the main house? I am okay in the work lodge.” He doesn’t turn and just waves a hand in the air leaving me to huff and puff until Maddy, another giant of a man, helps me to my room.

“Cassie!” A screech welcomes me as I step foot into the dining hall, where there are a smattering of people. Kennedy, still squealing, speeds walks to me. If she wasn’t wearing a tight knee length dress and killer heels, she would be full on sprinting towards me. I love her outbursts, they’re a true sign of love in my eyes. We embrace each other fiercely. “I missed you so much! My tall twin is back!” We both snort at the terrible nickname the other girls gave us in high school. With her high heels and my short ones, we magically became the same height.



“Aspen!” A small curly red-headed woman perfectly glides in.

Her smooth voice warms my soul. “Cassie, so lovely to see you again. It’s been so long. I wish we had more time to spend with you.”

I grab and squeeze her hand. “There will be now that we are in the same time zone. We will have plenty of opportunities in the future.” She may not know it, but she is the one thing that has kept me going no matter how hard life has been.

“How was the drive?”

I guess she hasn’t talked to her brother who is clearly trying to avoid me now. “It was okay. Quiet.” Ken makes a face but a commotion grabs her attention.

“Shit. I’m sorry Cas. We have to extinguish some fires before tomorrow. Eat all you want, it’s buffet style with fancy foods.”

I shake my head. “Go! Take care of things. Thanks for a place to stay and we can celebrate after your honeymoon. The next two days should be about you gals.” I grin. I am happy to get a breather before Ken can go full interrogation mode on how I left my family or the car ride with Oliver. I wouldn’t know how to talk about either topic.

She grins and walks into the crowd. Aspen hesitates for a moment. “It may be our day, but you are our friend. If you need anything we are a call away and Oliver will be in the same building. He will help you with anything, trust me, he will.” She gives me a weird little wink before following her soon to be wife.

Before I follow everyone to bed, there is something I need to look at. I quietly walk out the back door and toward the altar that sits under the wooden pergola I built. It is artfully arranged with flowers and fabrics for tomorrow. Lighting bugs fill the darkness where the

outside lights can't reach. The peace of the crickets chirping sets my soul at ease. I take my heels off feeling the soft grass under my feet. My hand brushes over the dark oak wood tracing the bird and deer carving I spent hours on in the past months. When life felt like shit, I went to my cousin's shop and carved into the wood. I didn't intend to add it but as I was building the frame it looked so plain I had to give it life. Now my hopes can grow alongside their love.

"Beautiful." His voice makes me jump. I turn and find Oliver standing next to me. "Sorry I didn't mean to scare you."

Regaining my footing, "So you are speaking to me now."

"Cassie, I am sorry about being so pushy. Things aren't really going my way today, and I guess it made me reflect on that when you talked about your parents."

He takes a deep breath. "Why do they have to be so narrow minded?" he mumbles.

I lean against the beam, "Your parents?"

He grumbles, "Both, but yes. I went to talk to them about the wedding, but they still refuse to take part. They are upset about it being held at our family home." His glance shifts to the distant fields. "That's one of the only good things about tradition, it got me all this." He gestures around us.

"How so?"

"It was just my mom. My grandparents weren't able to have another baby. My grandfather, being traditional, wanted a boy. He was ecstatic when I was born. I was raised to do this"

"Didn't you want to do anything else?"

He smiled. "I did. My dad still made me go to school and made sure I got part time jobs anywhere I wanted. No matter how many jobs I got, nothing felt as right as being here."

“Must be nice.” I give him a sad smile.

His hand gently grips my chin making me look up at him. He peers down at my necklace. “Hardworker,” He smiles softly. “I know we met for the first time today, but I heard stories about you for years. You helped my sister through a bad time, and were there when she felt alone in that isolated school. Let us... let me help you.”

Seeing the sorrow in his eyes is hard, if Ken told him everything that happened there, he knew it was hell for girls like us. The ones who don't fit the norm. I take his hand. “After.” I promise.

He nods, squeezing my hand before leaning down and placing a kiss over my knuckles. “After.”

The ceremony was beautiful. I watched as they gazed lovingly at each other and a tinge of jealousy sparked in me. They deserve this happiness. I know if I chose that path for myself there would only be momentary happiness. What they have is forever. Kennedy speaks with tears in her eyes. “Before you my life was abnormal, I never truly felt attraction to any other man or woman. I was just going through the motions of life when a spirited red-head carrying way too many books fell into my life. My love, you are my spark, and I can't wait to have amazing adventures full of joy and excitement.” Neither of their teary eyes leave each other as Aspen takes over.

“Never thought I would find love outside of the books I bury myself in, but you changed that. You continue to deal with my stubbornness and show me a world I never expected to

experience. You turn my sappy romance dreams into reality. I'll spend the rest of our lifetime cherishing the love you have given me."

The officiant comes back with the rings. As he announced the rest of the vows and exchanging of rings. "I now announce that you are wed. you may kiss your wife." Leaving me surprised, Aspen grabs Kennedy leaning her down for a deep passionate kiss that Ken happily gives into. We continue to the reception where we drink wine and dance. Ken and Aspen have yet to let each other go for a second. I stand on the side watching it all. "Beautiful." His voice comes from my side.

I shake my head. "They are." I look up to him. His eyes are on me. He shakes his head and holds out his hand. "Dance with me." I hesitate for a moment but take his hand. He guides me out on the dance floor and we sway to soft music. For a long time, we peacefully hold each other and dance.

"Cassie," he grabs my attention. "It's after." My breath catches.

"Oliver," I bite my tongue, "it's a long, unpleasant story."

He holds my chin and gently places his forehead against mine. "I am here to listen and help anyway I can. I promise."

I nod. For unknown reasons, I feel like I can tell him anything, and that I can put my heart out there one more time. "Okay," I take a deep breath ignoring the tears trying to escape, "It started..."