

Excerpt -The Do-Over

By MK Schiller

Kyle sat in a booth at Duggan's waiting impatiently for Lanie Carmichael. The sooner she got here, the sooner this ordeal would be over. Kyle dreaded this meeting-slash-date, but maybe it wouldn't be so bad. After all, she was a fan, and the evening might consist of her gushing and complimenting him. That would be enjoyable at least, and then he'd head over to the fiery redhead's place after. Sarah or Suzie or something. He'd hit the jackpot with her. She was a yoga instructor and super flexible. It was too bad he'd have to stop answering her texts soon. She was already looking at him with those "let's nest" eyes. It was a shame since he'd only slept with her twice. He bet Lanie would look at him with those eyes on first sight.

He winced when he saw the tall, frumpy woman looking around the room. *Please, don't be Lanie Carmichael.* A tall blonde in a miniskirt bumped her and headed his way. Thank God Brad is a true friend, Kyle thought. The blonde returned his smile, but instead of taking a seat, she walked right past him. Kyle followed her path, enjoying the view but also mourning it. He turned back to see Tall Frumpy taking slow, steady steps toward him and smiling idiotically. She was dressed in an ill-fitting beige suit made up of so many layers Kyle wondered if he could even accurately guess her bra size. Probably an A or maybe B. She had on a navy coat in a man's cut. Underneath the coat, there appeared to be a mock turtleneck, a vest, a blazer, and the most matronly skirt he'd ever seen, all in various shades of beige. Her heels even looked orthopedic if that was possible. She stood in front of him, holding out her hand like a panting puppy wanting to be petted.

"Hi, Kyle. It's so nice to meet you. I'm Lanie Carmichael." She shook his hand firmly. Her hands were small, but she had a man's grip for sure. She laid her navy coat and the huge purse that was the size of a small suitcase in the seat across from him. Then she shocked Kyle by sliding in next to him instead of across from him. Yep, definitely stalker, Kyle thought miserably, downing his whiskey. Kyle stared at her in disbelief, but she just kept smiling like it was natural to sit next to him.

"What are you drinking?" he finally asked her.

"I think I'll have a virgin piña colada." Kyle cocked his eyebrow at her choice of drink. This woman was at least twenty-one...although she could have been fifty-one in that getup. Why was she ordering a virgin drink? Was she an alcoholic? Had Brad set him up with a frumpy, stalker lush?

As Kyle placed their drink order, he wondered if it was rude to ask her to order at the same time. The sooner they ate, the sooner he could test just how far back the flexible yoga instructor's legs could go.

"So you work with Brad?" Kyle asked in a lame attempt at conversation.

"Yes. We're both juniors at our firm. I'll make partner this year. Brad probably will in two years." *Jesus, is that an insult to Brad?* How could he describe this girl as shy? She was very full of herself.

"That's great. So do you like it?" He didn't know why, but her odd demeanor was interesting.

She adjusted the mop of curly auburn hair that threatened to spring free of the tight bun on top of her head. "I'm good at it. It's what I'm meant to do."

"Why? Do you like fighting for the little guy and getting justice?" Kyle asked somewhat mockingly.

Lanie took a long sip of her drink, followed by a deep breath. "No, it's not my job to get justice for people. That's what the courts do."

"Then what's your job?"

"Winning."

"And do you win often, Lanie?"

She shrugged and gave him a crooked grin, which actually softened her harsh features. "More often than not. That's why I'm on the fast track." Damn, she had a high opinion of herself. Knocking her down a few pegs would be delivering his own brand of justice.

"Why do you win so much?"

"Preparation and hard work...but mostly, I'm a good observer." Kyle bit his lip, trying to hold in his smirk. "It's true. You have to know people to understand what they will or won't accept. Most of my cases don't even make it to court. I'm able to settle them with tactical negotiation."

"So you know people?" Kyle asked, thinking it would be fun to make this girl falter a little.

"I think I do most of the time. Some are easier to read than others." The waitress came back to get their orders. Kyle ordered his usual burger, but he was shocked again when Lanie ordered the ribs. What kind of girl ordered the messiest menu item on the first date? It occurred to Kyle that all they had talked about was her. Kyle wondered if Brad was so in love with his new girlfriend that he was losing his mind. In whose reality did this girl have a crush on him? She wasn't just socially awkward. That was an understatement. What's more, she was egotistical. Shy? That was an outright lie.

"Am I easy to read, Lanie?" he asked, hoping it would make her uncomfortable. She turned to him, smiling and adjusting her huge black-rimmed spectacles.

"You're definitely on the easy end of the readability scale."

"Please, don't keep me in suspense. I would love a demonstration of your skills."

"Look, I know this is a pity date. You don't have to try so hard to make small talk." Kyle's cynical grin disappeared as his jaw dropped at her blunt response. This was the weirdest date he'd ever had. It was even stranger than the psychic who'd insisted on feeling his aura. At least that ended in hot sex when he'd

showed her right where his aura was.

A sudden crazy thought occurred to him, and he glared at her. “Wait a minute. A pity date for whom?” With her haughty attitude, this girl might think she was doing him a favor.

“Oh, don’t be offended. It’s very evident that you’re taking me out in pity.”

“I’m glad your powers of observation are as astute as you claim, Lanie,” Kyle retorted without a care that he was insulting her.

“They are. For example, I knew you wouldn’t find me attractive. I’m mousy and manly at the same time.” He wondered how many times her candid statements would stun him. “I’m a complete realist, and I know how I come off.” Usually when girls made disparaging remarks about their looks, they expected Kyle to correct them with a reassuring “you’re gorgeous, baby” or “you have a great body.” Lanie didn’t expect that. Her matter-of-fact statement made her even more puzzling.

“How did you know that? It’s true, of course, but I don’t think I looked at you with a scowl or anything.” She set the pace with her outspoken honesty, so he followed the path.

“Well, besides the obvious chasm between our looks, it’s your manner. You asked me out by text message. You didn’t pick me up at my house but asked me to meet you here”—she gestured around the room—“a sports bar, for God’s sake.” Their food came, and Lanie wasted no time digging in to her ribs.

“This is a restaurant. I think that is evident by the platter of meat before you,” Kyle said, nodding toward Lanie’s plate.

“It’s a restaurant with fifteen flat-screen TVs, each showing a different sport. They serve drinks on cardboard coasters featuring trivia. And the servers wear football jerseys and baseball hats. In my book, that’s a sports bar.”

“You’re crazy blunt. If you don’t like my choice, please feel free to leave.”

“I love it.”

“Well then, why are you so offended?”

“Who said I was offended? It’s just very obvious that you’re totally put off by me in every way.”

“Not every way. Your handshake is firm.” She laughed at his remark, which Kyle had meant as insulting. “Okay, observant one, I’m dying to know...why the hell did you agree to meet me if you knew I’d be turned off by you? It’s not the kind of impression you aim for on a date, in case you didn’t know. Brad told me you were a fan of mine.”

“Oh, I am. I enjoy your stories, but I didn’t want to meet you to impress you, sexually or otherwise. I sure

as hell didn't come here to flatter your inflated ego, if that's what you were thinking," she replied, taking intermittent breaks to lick the barbecue sauce from her fingers.

"Please enlighten me then. Why are you here?"

"I'll tell you when you're paying attention to me."

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"Talking and paying attention are two different things, but I suspect you know that. You have one eye on the football game, which the Bears are going to lose, by the way. And the other is on the leggy blonde in the white miniskirt at the bar." It was true, but Kyle was so surprised by her accuracy that he didn't even feel guilty about it.

"Well, it's kind of hard to keep my eye on you when you're sitting right next to me. And the Bears have a good shot here."

"Oh, I'm not insulted. I sat next to you because I want to watch the game too. And the Bears are going to lose because they really need a field goal right now, but their kicker sustained an injury during the last game that he hasn't recovered from."

He found her knowledge of football slightly disconcerting. He wanted to dislike her, but it was difficult when they had something in common. She wiped her chin, removing the residue of sauce, and turned to Kyle. He didn't meet her gaze for fear he couldn't maintain the blank expression on his face. "I don't mind that you're distracted. I'm sure you have to multitask at your job too, but I do ask that you keep at least one of your eyes on me. So choose. Leggy blonde or football game."

Kyle grinned, wondering if it was even possible to make this girl uncomfortable. He turned to give her his full attention. He was pleased to find he could stare at Lanie and still make out the blonde's glorious backside from this position.

"Oh, so you chose the blonde? You must like sex more than sports."

"Sex *is* a sport. And since you're watching the game, you can tell me the score. I'm better at delegating than multitasking. So, Lanie Carmichael, if you're not here to gush over me or seduce me, then why the hell are you here ruining my perfectly good view of a leggy blonde?" *There, that ought to do it. Now she'll cry, and it will be amusing in a way. God, I'm mean.* To his amazement, she just smiled her crooked smile and dug into another rib.

"You're right, enough small talk."

Dear God, this is her idea of small talk?

"I'm in love with Brad."

Kyle was thankful he wasn't drinking his whiskey, because he knew without a doubt that her bombshell confession would have made him choke. "What?"

"Yes, I love Brad, and you're Brad's best friend. Or at least a close friend, and I thought maybe you could help me."

"Does the loony bin know you've escaped or should we call them?"

"I know it's very strange, but here's the thing. I've worked with him for almost two years, and I know we're compatible. Like I said, I'm an observer, and he's the kind of man who fits all my needs."

"Huh, too bad he's busy fitting all your sister's needs," Kyle replied sarcastically. It was impossible for him to look away now. She had definitely won his full attention.

"That's just it. I'm not some kind of boyfriend-stealing bitch like you're thinking. I love my sister, but I've had much longer to observe her. I know Brad doesn't fit her ideal criteria."

"Why is that? Because he belongs to you. I pegged you for a stalker, and I was right. Journalists have some pretty strong observation skills too."

"Nothing like that. I'm not obsessed with him. What I'm proposing is a long shot, but many of the cases I've won have been long shots. I was successful because of my preparation, and this circumstance is similar." Lanie bit her lower lip, looking a little nervous for the first time. "Cassie likes Brad for all the reasons I like him. He's strong, handsome, sweet, and successful."

"Right. What's not to love? I know you're a lawyer, but Jesus, don't you have any scruples?" Kyle asked, rolling his eyes to show his outrage.

"I do. I love my sister. I do not intend to steal Brad from her. I'm just going to wait until she breaks up with him."

"And if she doesn't? In case you didn't know, Brad's really into her."

"Oh, I know he is. That's one of the reasons I like him too. He's not the cheating type, but unfortunately, Cassie is. She also gets bored easily. You guys would get along well, although she'd probably break up with you even faster than Brad."

Is she serious right now? Kyle wondered if he should start recording this so Brad knew exactly what kind of nut job his girlfriend's sister was. Fuck, they were also coworkers. Kyle made a mental note to encourage Brad to file a human resources complaint.

"So you just know she's going to break up with him?"

“I don’t know, but based on her history, my observations, and her list of criteria, I think she is. Cassie doesn’t like skeletons, and I think we both know that Brad has some.”

Kyle sat up straighter, wondering for the first time if he could get away with slapping a woman.

“You’re talking about his dad. That’s none of your business.”

“It’s public record. His dad was convicted of embezzlement, and although Brad has distanced himself, it’s still a stigma. I don’t think my sister knows because she would have broken things off by now.”

“Why don’t you tell her then? It would clearly be to your benefit.”

“Like you so succinctly stated, it’s none of my business.” She looked down at her hands, as if she was struggling with her own statement. “I know you don’t understand this, but I’m not trying to sabotage their relationship. I’m just waiting for the inevitable to happen, and when it does, I hope she’ll give me her blessing to pursue Brad, and he’ll be interested.”

“What are the other criteria? You said this sister of yours has a list?”

“Yes, not an actual list, but just things I know she looks for in a guy. Cassie’s been brought up to marry rich, and although Brad is successful, he’s never going to be a millionaire, which is what Cassie wants.”

“But that doesn’t matter to you, right? ’Cause you’re the good sister? The one who’ll get all the hand-me-downs.” Lanie winced. She was actually reacting appropriately for the first time.

“I have a different set of criteria. Like I said, it’s a long shot, but if I even have a chance, I’ll have to be diligent in my research, and that’s where I need your help.”

“How the fuck could I possibly help you seduce my friend, and why would I want to?”

She took a deep breath and put on a wide smile. It was too wide, as if she might be more nervous than she appeared. “Two very good questions, Kyle. I can see why you’re a top-notch journalist. Well, first off, I don’t want to seduce him. I want him to love me the way I love him. You can help me because you know the things about him I can’t easily observe.”

“Sounds manipulative as hell, and I guarantee it will never work.”

Lanie shrugged, popping the cherry from her froufrou drink into her mouth. “Probably not, but I’ll never know if I don’t try. My career is all about playing fair and by the rules, but you know what they say, ‘all’s fair when it comes to—’”

“Lady, you’re a fucking psycho. I think I need to call Brad and tell him about your fatal attraction obsession with him before you start stewing up rabbits.”

She didn't seem fazed by Kyle's vicious words. "I'm not a psycho. Trust me when I say it's not a situation where I feel like if I can't have him, no one can. He can break up with Cassie tomorrow and start dating another girl the next day. He is quite a catch, after all." She stared at Kyle hard, and her words came out stronger, with more emphasis. "However, if there's any chance he might find me worth loving back, then I want to be prepared for it. If you choose to tell him about our conversation, you certainly can. I figured you might, and it was a risk I was willing to take. Before you do, I think you should hear the other reason you may want to help me."

"What makes you think anything you could say would convince me?"

The waitress came, and they ordered more drinks. Kyle noticed the leggy blonde was still at the bar. Unfortunately, this girl was so interestingly crazy that he felt compelled to hear out her scheme. After all, as a friend and journalist, it was Kyle's duty to extract as much information as possible. It would be helpful when they were at the police station later. He frowned at the thought of spending the evening at the police station. *Oh, flaxen blonde and red-haired vixen, one or both of you would have been so good tonight.*

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