

When I stepped out of the elevator into the office lobby, what I saw was achingly modern and sleek. Most advertising agencies had a contemporary appeal, but this one was on steroids.

The floors were gleaming white marble; the front desk and waiting area were back-lit from floor to ceiling; the couches were pure white leather, accented with royal blue and lime green throw pillows; and fresh calla lilies in tall glass vases peeked out from every angle. A huge flat screen television sat to one side. The lobby was empty, and the overhead lights were turned off, giving the whole place an eerie glow.

I glanced at my phone. It was 6:51. I wasn't sure what to do so I sat down on one of the couches. It felt cold and hard. I began checking emails and scrolling through my Instagram feed.

That was when I heard high heels clicking down the hallway.

A woman appeared. She looked like she was in her mid-thirties with long, glossy black hair and lots of makeup, like she had gone apocalyptic at the MAC counter. She wore all black: dress, jacket, stockings, and five-inch heels. She did not smile.

“Are you Jane?” she inquired without visibly opening her full, shiny red lips.

“Yes,” I replied.

“I'm Simone.”

I held out my hand and she gave me the once over, pausing slightly at my boots with a faint indication of approval.

“Follow me.” She turned and strutted back down the hall, hips swishing from side to side, stopping at a door with a plaque that read ‘Craig A. Keller.’

She knocked.

“Yes,” a voice from behind the door called.

Simone stood at the door and announced indifferently, “Your 6:30 is here.”

A moment later, Craig opened the door, appearing dashing in a navy-blue suit with no tie. His hair, which appeared always to be just the right length, not too long or too short, looked a little windswept. His pinstriped shirt was unbuttoned a bit further than propriety dictated. One look at those intense green eyes caused me to take a deep breath. *Jesus, this man was sexy.*

“Jane, have you been waiting long?” he asked, giving me a lazy smile.

“No, Mr. Keller, only a few minutes.” I shook his outstretched hand. “I apologize for being so late.”

He obviously didn’t care in the slightest about my lateness. “Call me Craig,” he requested, motioning to Simone to close the door. She shot him a look of contempt. “Thank you, Simone.”

She immediately skulked out. *What an oddball that one is.*

Craig’s office was decorated to the hilt in Eames-era furniture. His desk was all glass and the legs to it were tilted in on each side, sort of like a bow-legged woman in high heels. His chair was a swanky, mid-century modern white leather swivel with chrome. The chairs across from his desk were plush orange suede. Curtains to panoramic windows were flung open, displaying a breath-taking view of downtown. A full bar and lounge area were situated on the other side of his office, where a fireplace with an animal print rug lying at the hearth beckoned seductively. The whole place reeked of modern elitism.

I wasn’t sure where to sit so I approached one of the orange suede chairs.

“It’s after hours, Jane,” he declared. “Let’s have a drink.” He motioned me to the white leather couches in the lounge, as he took off his suit jacket and hung it gingerly on a wall hook. I was not sure where to sit; the furniture looked too pristine to be functional.

“What would you like?” he called as I settled into one of the white leather couches, carefully smoothing my skirt so that it didn’t ride up my thighs and placing my notepad and file folder in my lap.

“I have vodka, wine, champagne, beer...”

“Water’s fine, thank you,” I responded shyly.

He laughed. “Oh, come on, Jane. Is Warren that much of a tight-ass these days? Don’t tell me he doesn’t let you guys drink when you’re working late.”

“Maybe on special occasions,” I offered slowly, thinking of the barely-used bar at WM&A. “I mean, we *are* an ad agency and everything.”

Craig silently smiled at my comment while putting ice into two glasses. I looked around and noticed a large painting on the wall above the fireplace. It was of a woman lying on a horse, grasping it around the neck. She had long red hair and wore a dress with a tutu and her breasts were bare. Her look was solemn, and the background was blue with little shadowy circus characters floating in the background. Even though the woman in the painting was half-naked, not me, I felt exposed.

Craig handed me a drink and sat down right next to me. I awkwardly twisted my body to face him and crossed my legs, which I caught him eyeing.

“Salut,” he said and clinked my glass with his.

“Salut.” Taking a sip, I tasted vodka. My eyes widened slightly, and he smiled, showing those perfect, white teeth.

“It’s okay to loosen up in my office,” he reassured, focusing his penetrating gaze on me. I felt the same way I did the night I fell in front of him at the party, like an insecure teenager in the presence of the hot football star.

“I brought my resume,” I offered, pulling it from the file on my lap and handing it to Craig. He accepted it but didn’t look at it, placing it instead on the coffee table and setting his drink on it, using it as a coaster.

“You like Marc Chagall?” he asked, casually gesturing toward the painting above the fireplace.

“I’m not very familiar with his works,” I responded, eyeing the painting again. “But I like that one.”

“The title translates to something like ‘The Dancer at the Circus’,” he explained. “I collect art and have several Chagalls throughout the office. If you’re a good girl, I’ll give you a little tour later.”

*A good girl?* This was sounding less like a job interview with each passing minute.

“What do you consider good?” I asked, feeling the warmth of the vodka in my stomach. He must have poured a strong one. It didn’t taste like it was mixed with anything.

He lit up slightly at my comment, like he wasn’t necessarily expecting it. “Oh, you’ll know soon enough,” he remarked, glancing down at my boots. Again, I was struck by the length and thickness of his eyelashes. On any other man, I might consider them girlish, but on Craig’s face, juxtaposed with all his masculine features, they made him look fiercely sexual. “Tell me about you,” he suggested, eyes fixed again on mine.

“What do you want to know?” I noticed he was not wearing his wedding ring tonight.

“Everything,” he answered, taking a swig of his drink and resting his arm along the top of the couch, perilously close to my shoulder, eliciting a slight shiver.

It was then I realized I did nothing to prepare for this meeting and was not sure what to say. I guess I should have expected to get the ‘where-do-you-see-yourself-in-five-years?’ text book question but this was not shaping up to be any average interview. There was no way he was

expecting me to start listing my accomplishments at WM&A ... not the way we were sitting nor the way he was looking at me. I began to feel confused, especially with the vodka taking effect.

“I ... I’m not sure where to start,” I stammered, looking down at my blank notepad. *What was he expecting me to say?*

Craig came to my rescue. “Jane,” he said letting his hand touch my shoulder gently. “Relax. This isn’t an interview. I didn’t invite you here to ask you questions about your work history. I know what you do and who you work with.”

“Name someone.” I called his bluff.

“The Henrys, for example. How are they to work with?” he answered in rote fashion, like he had my career memorized.

This time, I took a large swig from my drink as he watched my every move.

“Um, I guess they are, you know, sort of high maintenance,” I began cautiously.

“From what I’ve heard, that’s the understatement of the year,” he remarked, laughing. “But good for you for not being negative about a client. I’ll bet Rita’s a real piece of work,” he added.

“Let’s just say she’s very aware of the aging process,” I answered.

“Well put.” He laughed again. “How do you handle her?”

“It was a little challenging at first but, once I learned her hot buttons, I was able to navigate her personality. But, honestly, Warren manages her more one-on-one. She prefers the boss’s attention.”

He nodded, looking as though he were processing the information. “Do they pay a monthly retainer, or do they have you guys work with a flat fee by project?” When he sensed my discomfort with this question, he quickly added, “I’m only trying to understand how big of a

budget you've worked with in the past ... just a ballpark figure ... this is all strictly confidential."

"Retainer," I disclosed. "Somewhere around a hundred and fifty thousand a month." I knew I shouldn't be quoting figures, but he gave me the feeling he was trustworthy. And, although I had never seen the Henrys contract, I knew from the billable hours approximately what the agency was getting paid.

"Ah, okay. That's solid." He was looking at me thoughtfully. "So, Jane, tell me what you're passionate about."

I put my drink down and considered the question. *God, what was I supposed to say to that? Mr. Keller, I've never been passionate about anything in my life until I met you. Oh, maybe I was passionate about these boots that cost me a fortune, and which are still not paid for, but they are worth every penny because I saw the way you were looking at them and that kind of acknowledgement, coming from a man like you, is priceless. In fact, every single cent I've spent chasing fashion, plastic surgery, hair dye, and cosmetics is worth it at this moment because you think I'm attractive. What am I passionate about? Nothing, Mr. Keller. I hate my job and I owe sexual favors to a creepy client in return for his promise to retain our agency ... my one big client, who is launching a show with live pandas. Other than that, Sir, I've got nothing, so hit me with another question, one I can answer with superficial ad-speak. That's all I really can handle now.*

"You're being so quiet, Jane," Craig assessed, suddenly snapping me out of my crazy thought bubble. I had been silent at least a full minute. "That wasn't meant to be a trick question," he said getting up for more drinks. The one I had was somehow empty, and I felt light-headed. But I didn't protest as I watched him make round two of the same strong cocktails.

“A woman as exceptional as you must have a lot of passions,” he hinted, handing me another drink. I could feel my face turning red. He sat even closer this time. I must have seemed incoherent because I had absolutely nothing to say in response to his question, which felt inappropriately personal yet veiled under the guise of professionalism. Maybe that was his goal ... to blur the lines between the two.

Thankfully Craig’s office phone started ringing so I could think of some sort of response that didn’t reveal too much yet would satisfy his seemingly unmitigated craving for details about my life. It was all too clear that Craig Keller was more interested in me than I ever would have imagined. And I found myself wondering again what Kat was hiding about him.

After a few rings, Craig stood up to look at the caller ID on one of his phones.

“Do you need to answer that?” I asked quickly.

“I’m sorry, Jane.” He picked up the phone. His demeanor went from careless confidence to slight agitation.

“I told you,” he uttered tersely into the receiver, eyes narrowing. “Yes, I know ... no, I’m not ... I’ll call you from the car.”

He hung up, then looked up at me and smiled his relaxed smile again.

“I must be keeping you from something,” I said, feeling like I needed to leave.

“You’re not keeping me from anything,” he denied. “So, what do they pay you over there?”

I hesitated before responding. “Not nearly enough.”

He laughed. “No one thinks they get paid enough. Tell you what, whatever Warren’s paying you, I’ll give you thirty percent more in base salary, plus a healthy bonus.” He said this like he was going through a tedious transaction and wanted to get it over with quickly.

“That seems more than fair,” I responded, thinking it was a huge chunk of change I hardly expected ... that fleeing Philippe’s crosshairs to the safety of Craig Keller was enough compensation.

“Think about it and get back to me.” With that, he stood up and walked toward the door. “Now come with me,” he ordered. “Take your drink.” He grabbed his jacket and slid it back on, signaling me to follow him.

“Where are we going?” I asked, uncomfortably picking up my notepad and purse.

“Leave that stuff,” he commanded. “No one’s here. We’re going to take a little tour.” His face looked full of mischief.

I got up and walked toward him, purposely leaving my drink on the table.

He led the way through dimly lit hallways, passing dark vacant offices. I tried to read the name plates, alternately watching Craig’s confident swagger directly in front of me. Benjamin Whitman, Steven Richards, Martin Strong ... all men. When we got to the end of a long hallway, Craig took out his keys and opened the door to an office without a name plate. He turned on the lights and ushered me in. The inside was easily four times the size of my current office, completely emptied out except for a desk, chair, phone. and computer.

“If everything works out, this will be your office,” he announced. “We’ll do whatever you want in terms of redecorating. You can choose what you like for the walls, sofa, conference table.”

I walked slowly around the room and looked out the blinds. It was a smaller snapshot of the same view Craig had in his office. There was a door in the corner behind the desk.

“Where does that door lead?” I queried.

Craig advanced to the door and opened it for me. “Bathroom and shower,” he boasted. “We want our employees to like the place where they spend most of their lives.”

I was dumbfounded, thinking that this office was close to the size of my apartment. I pictured myself bringing clients to meetings, feeling like a downtown L.A. big shot ad executive.

“I have something else to share with you, if you’re ready,” he suggested furtively.

I followed him to a room that was labeled, ‘Art Library.’ Again, he brought out his keys and opened the door.

“After you,” he said, holding the door open for me. I crossed the threshold and caught my breath.

“Wow.”

“You like?” He beamed at me with pride. He looked so handsome at that moment, it was difficult for me to tear my eyes away from his face long enough to look at the paintings. Canned lights pointing at the artwork gave the gallery a romantic glow.

Craig linked his arm through mine and led me from painting to painting, like we were on a date in Paris. With each one, he stopped and explained a little about it and where he acquired it. I just followed along in awe, hanging on his every word.

When we got to the last one, he stood behind me. “This one’s my favorite. It’s called “Lovers in the Red Sky.”

A woman stretched across the canvas, bare-breasted, wearing only a white skirt. A man clutched her from behind and they seemed to be bathing in red light. A bouquet of flowers was also floating, along with the shadowy circus animals in many of the other works on display. Again, I got the feeling of being as exposed as the woman in the painting.

“I found this one in London when I was working on an ad campaign for an airline,” he described. “I was so moved by it ... it made me feel so ... I don’t know ... hopeful? A little mysterious.” His voice deepened as he moved closer behind me. “How does it make you feel?” I

could smell his skin – it smelled faintly and divinely of soap. I felt the heat of his body and the consequent mind-numbing sexual tension.

“It ... it makes me feel ...” I mumbled dreamily, staring at the painting and inhaling Craig’s scent. “It makes me feel like anything might happen – like maybe they’ll come crashing to the ground – or maybe they’ll emerge in a sea of light – something frightening or something beautiful.”

I felt Craig’s hands on my shoulders, caressing them softly. He moved his body so close that it was touching mine until we were in the exact same pose as the couple in the painting. I felt a shudder from head to toe, his lips on my skin, nibbling at the back of my neck. I sank back into him, not attempting to resist. And, even if I wanted to, there was no way I could. I was transfixed.

He slowly turned me around and pulled me close to him, looking in my eyes. “So, I guess we found what you’re passionate about,” he said in a soft, smooth voice.

“You think?” I breathed, feeling the heat of his lips about a quarter centimeter from mine. His breath smelled like cherry-flavored Jolly Rancher candies. He was moving his hands up and down my back, settling at my waist as he pulled me even closer to him.

I panicked, becoming acutely aware that what I was about to do was contrary to anything I had ever done, and abruptly pushed him away.

“What’s wrong?” He gave me a puzzled look, like it was standard practice to seduce a young associate prior to offering her a job, and as though I were the first person ever to question his advances.

“I’m ... sorry,” I stuttered. “I can’t – I didn’t come here for this.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, now amused.

I had to think about that for a second.

“Come on,” he said, taking my hand and pulling me closer to him, “don’t be so parochial.”

“But ... that’s not ...” I faltered.

“It’s not what? How the game’s supposed to be played?”

I shook my head, “No.”

“According to who?” he asked.

I looked down at my feet in silence.

“I don’t follow rules, Jane. If you want to follow rules, stay with Warren. If you want to realize your potential, come with me. I have big plans for you. You only need to let it happen.”

I looked at him, desperately trying to come up with something to say but falling short. He didn’t follow rules and that was what made him so exciting. The money and power were enough of an aphrodisiac ... the looks and intelligence completed the package. The fact that he seemed to answer to no one made him, cruelly, almost God-like.

“But what would that make me?” I whispered.

“Successful.”

I stared at him in silence, trying to read more into his face. *What exactly was he offering?*

He smiled and shrugged. “Think about it.”

I slowly nodded but said nothing. My thoughts were spinning.

“Let’s go back to my office.” He led me back down the hallway. Once we were in his office again, he went to the bar, pulled a bottle of water out of his refrigerator and brought it to me.

“Here,” he said, handing me the bottle. “You okay to drive?”

I nodded, getting my purse, notepad, and file folder. My resume still sat on the coffee table, stained and wrinkled from the condensation off Craig’s glass, now dried into a round

pucker, ink bleeding all around it, blending all the details listed on my executive summary. So much for adhering to conventions, I thought wryly. I ventured toward the door and realized I had a long drive home and did not want to have to stop.

“Would you mind if I used the ladies’ room?” I asked politely, once again aware that I was in the private office of L.A.’s most powerful ad executive.

“Help yourself,” he replied. “It’s over there.” He pointed behind his desk.

I stepped into his private bathroom, turned on the light, and almost gasped at the elaborate layout. The walls were orange, and ornate silver fixtures and mirrors were everywhere. There was both a toilet and bidet, along with a walk-in rain shower. I hesitated to use the toilet as I realized there was a chance Craig would be able to hear me pee. I turned on the sink faucet so there would be no chance of that and quickly used his toilet.

Upon washing my hands in the sink, I noticed a ring sitting in the soap dish. I picked it up and examined it more closely. I recognized it to be Craig’s wedding ring, the one I saw him wearing at Ammo. There appeared to be a Celtic symbol, resembling two interlocking hearts, sitting within an oval shape. It was engraved on the outside of the ring. I replaced it in the soap dish, dried my hands, and retouched my makeup, checking my nose from each side.

I returned to find Craig leaning against the doorway of his office texting someone. He looked up and smiled when I walked out. “All set?”

As we ventured back down the hallway toward the lobby, he stayed behind me, and I could feel his eyes on my body without even looking back. I was certain he was evaluating me.

“Let me walk you to your car,” he insisted, pushing the elevator button. “What floor?”

“Seven,” I answered as the elevator door opened.

We rode the elevator in silence as my thoughts raced. I stole a glance at Craig, who was staring absent-mindedly at the elevator reader. I thought about the ring he left in the soap dish

and the call he received while we were in his office. It had to be his wife; I wondered about their relationship. If I were married to him, I wouldn't want him out of my sight. I would be beside myself with jealousy every time he worked late, especially given what 'working late' evidently meant to this man. I wondered if they had some sort of arrangement, that she knew at this very moment her husband's wedding ring sat in the soap dish of his office bathroom while he plied a young woman with drinks and art. I wondered why she would stay with him. I suddenly felt sorry for his wife.

The elevator came to a halt and we walked through the empty parking lot to my car. When we found it, I held out my hand to shake his. He grinned, taking my hand and shaking it with exaggerated professionalism, mocking my gesture.

Then he leaned in, put his hand around the back of my neck in an oddly familiar way, pulled me closer to him and whispered in my ear, "Don't take too much time thinking. I wouldn't want you to miss out on something good."

I backed away from him, so I could see his expression, which was not at all serious. Still, somehow, I knew he was not kidding. He didn't come across as the type of man who liked to wait ... *for anything*.

I nodded, managing to get myself into my car and, with trembling hands, drove away. I really needed to talk to someone but, for once, there was no one I could call. I knew I should call Kat at this point, but she would interrogate me as to why I would have accepted an in-person meeting with Craig Keller in the first place. Marisa was too fragile right now and I didn't want to heap more drama upon her already over-burdened shoulders. Derek was out of the question for obvious reasons. So was anyone at work as well as my grandparents. Yet, something inside me wasn't interested in anyone's opinion. There was a sublime power in having caught the attention of Craig Keller, no matter how fleeting or transient it would end up being.

Adele Royce – Playing Jane

As I drove, I opened the car windows and cranked up the radio. I felt the cool November air, took a deep breath, and surveyed the evening sky, spread out in every direction with its infinite configuration of lights ... houses, cars, traffic signals ... and I suddenly felt a pang of nostalgia. Is this what it was like to be an adult? When I was a child, I never imagined real life would be like this. Even a few months ago, when it was just Marisa and Derek and I, out partying together, things seemed so much lighter. I never knew one lie or bad decision could lead to another one, and potentially into ruin ... or maybe the opposite.

Maybe life as a grown-up was just a never-ending series of decisions, not necessarily bad or good, black or white. Maybe it was more fun to live in Craig Keller's world, where no one followed rules. But rules were the only things I ever knew and, one by one, I was shattering them, faster than I ever thought possible.