

**TOUCH**

by

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Sylvia held the large envelope in her fingers like a presenter at an awards show, enticing, teasing, and grinning because she knew the secretive act was killing Deena.

Deena frowned but couldn't find the strength to put much effort into it. She was feeling pretty relaxed, a slight buzz and a sugar high roaming together like the best of friends through her system. "Syl, quit."

"But it's your *birthday*," Sylvia sang in a high-low pitch, waving the light yellow envelope like a flag over her shoulder, out of reach but oh-so-apparently for Deena. A red velvet cake sat on the plain coffee table with two nice-sized slices cut out. Remnant crumbs on the plates were sitting forgotten now that the wine had been opened. It was a bought cake, which had irked Deena when Sylvia said she wasn't allowed to bake her own. At least Sylvia hadn't bought the red velvet cake from one of her competitors.

Playful jazz hummed from the stereo in the corner behind the sofa as the two women gabbed. Sylvia had ribbed Deena a little about working too hard, which was part of the reason Sylvia was at Deena's. There hadn't been many chances for girl time lately.

Deena's wedding cake bakery was in high demand now that she'd hired Nicole Sparks, a specialty baker with an extraordinary talent out of New York's best pastry school. By adding her delicious range of flavor to Deena's design and decorating, the pair had become a "hot" commodity for those who could spend the kind of money on one of their cakes. Wedding cakes on that grandiose scale weren't for the faint of heart. It was a mark of success that Deena had succeeded to this level of demand before she was thirty. And a blessing that all that art training hadn't gone to waste.

In fact, today was her birthday and she was turning twenty-nine. The teasing light in Sylvia's sparkling eyes was hard to miss while she held the envelope that was making Deena salivate with anticipation.

No one knew her better than Sylvia. No one bought her birthday cards anymore either.

"I love you, darlin', but if you don't hand it over, I'm going to do something dreadfully inappropriate," Deena drawled in her "dare you" tone of voice the two women had shared since high school.

"Oh? Like what?"

"Hold you down and force-feed you a pound of fondant."

Sylvia shuddered with a flutter of her eyelashes. "Can I get a guy to help with the spreading?"

Deena's snicker turned into a laugh. "Evil woman."

"Love you too." Sylvia brought the card forward. "Here you go." She whipped it out of Deena's grasping reach at the last second. "You have to abide by the card. No cop outs."

"Huh?" *What was that supposed to mean?*

"You'll see."

"What do you mean I'll see?"

"We'll celebrate not only your birthday but the fact that Brian the jerk has left the building."

The joy dried out of Deena's expression. "Brian is gone, and he is no longer worth my energy to remember."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

Deena snatched the card out of Sylvia's hand at the same time she heard her friend's mumbled "Bastard prick-in-the-mud." She finally held the card in her hands and couldn't care less what Sylvia thought or said about her ex-boyfriend. She and Brian had been together for not quite two years when he left in a fit of testosterone-fueled indignation just as her business began to really get off the ground. He hadn't minded that she was career oriented; in fact, he'd always said it was one of the first things he'd found attractive about her. Apparently he had his limits though, namely when she was working all week then supporting her business at the actual functions to attract clients and interest on the weekends.

He'd accused her of neglect and of intentionally putting *everything* before their relationship, which hadn't been true in the least. The final straw had been her Aunt Laura's wedding. And that cake order had been family. It shouldn't have mattered at all to their relationship.

The argument they'd had that night after the reception had been awful. She'd never seen it coming, which made the fight that much worse. Accusations had sliced her like ice shards in a violent wind. He'd been hateful, spiteful, and cruel. The things he'd said had shredded her, belittled her. For ignoring him. For taking too much time away from him. For not being there when *he* wanted or needed sex.

Looking back, Deena realized Brian had been the type who needed to be the center of the universe. The more her business prospered, the more threatened he'd felt. Deena had never been that dependent on any man other than her father.

The yellow of the envelope in her hand mocked her. The sundress she'd worn to Aunt Laura's wedding had been yellow. The day had ended with the slam of her front door and a very angry Brian. The cruel slash of his voice had obliterated the feeling of a job well done in less than two seconds once they were alone in her condo.

*"Jesus! Did you have to stay for four goddamn hours? The evening is shot now."*

*Deena whirled, stunned at his seething tone, unprepared for the attack. He'd been unusually quiet on the drive to her place, but she'd had no idea this was waiting for her. "What are you talking about? It was my aunt's wedding." The day had gone wonderfully in her book.*

*"That wasn't why you stayed," he sneered. "The wedding was a done deal. You could've left after the cutting, and you know it."*

*She crossed her arms over her middle, protectively. "What is this about, Brian?" Brian hated to dance, so she'd enjoyed herself with her family and friends. Since when did that become a sin? It wasn't like she hadn't offered. He'd barely spoken to her the longer she'd stayed. She'd assumed it was because dancing was uncomfortable for him. Apparently she hadn't even been close.*

*He slashed a hand through his blond hair. "Why don't you check your schedule and make sure you have time for me first?" His mouth pursed into a jeering snarl. "Seems I'm going to come second to any function you have. When do you have time for me?" he demanded.*

*"That's not fair! Every person I talk to is a contact, a word-of-mouth sale. You know how much I have to work to advertise for Sweet Engagements. Building a reputation takes a lot of time and communication with clients. Where is this coming from?"*

*For a second, it looked like he was going to relent, pull back, but he didn't. "You've been knee-deep in this wedding --"*

*"She's family!"*

*He went on as if she hadn't said a word. "And every order you've had for the last four months. I have to schedule nights with you because you're always at the damn bakery!"*

*She blanched. Then he transferred the blame. Something she realized too late he was good at.*

*"If you didn't want to be with me, or have sex, you could have told me you wanted to end it."*

*"But --" Wait, so this all boiled down to having sex? Maybe she had ignored him the last two weeks, but it wasn't a deliberate action.*

*"Because I sure as shit can't get it from you. I had to swap my weekend with someone to be here today, remember?" And that was somehow her fault too? "When were you going to spend time with me?"*

*Her eyes widened. "This wasn't about you," she told him coolly. "This was about Laura and being with family. I thought you would want to be there to support me. Any tenderness she'd felt for the man glaring at her evaporated. The pain seared at her heart, a piece of it breaking for the emotion she had believed they'd shared."*

*Brian spun, jerking the front door open, leaving with a parting shot. "That was your mistake, then, because I'm done fighting your business, adjusting my schedule and my life to spend time with you."*

*She winced when the slam of the door made the walls shake. He'd swapped weekends with a coworker -- one weekend -- and somehow that made her a villain?*

With a grimace, she pushed the memories away. The sex hadn't been all that great either. Sylvia put a hand on Deena's bent knee. "I'm sorry, honey. I shouldn't have mentioned him, but you do need this. The only point he did have was you do work too hard. Now open that. You'll understand."

Dutifully, Deena opened the envelope, sliding the flap out of the tuck. Sylvia hated to lick them. In her words, they "tasted like dried crap." Deena smirked at the voice in her head. She'd heard it often enough to know it and the tone, verbatim.

She removed the birthday card to read the inscription; Sylvia always picked something memorable. A folded sheet of paper fell into her lap, along with a business card. Reading the flowery embossed card first, she felt her eyes mist over with emotion. She swallowed to get her voice to work. "Damn, Sylvia."

"I know. I get you every year." A rolled shrug downplayed the weight of the friendship between them. Deena knew better. They'd shared homework assignments, mascara, and never hesitated to tell the other when a good book had to be read. Luckily they'd never had the same taste in men, but holding each other up when their hearts were broken was a specialty.

"You do," she agreed with a watery laugh, looking up, then skimming the card again. "You're the best friend a girl could have."

"I'm also the only holder of every dark secret you have. I could make a fortune!"

"Oh shut up!" she cried, laughing through the heartfelt tears, the card's words, and the meaning it had given her. She'd kept every one, since she was sixteen.

"Okay, the mushy stuff is over. Check out your gift."

Deena nodded, holding the business card between fingertips to unfold the page. The birthday card slipped to her lap as her eyes widened, knowing they were playing tricks on her as her fingers loosened and her jaw slackened, all at a rather comically, slow, shell-shocked pace.

"What? Oh my God!" Deena's gaze shot to Sylvia, unable to think beyond what she'd just read.

"Your first appointment is tomorrow at four. Don't be late."

"But..." Deena sat back stunned in shocked silence. "The Touch Spa? That place costs a fortune. It's where God goes, for heaven sakes!"

Sylvia waved her fingers in dismissal. "It's not *that* bad. I had a couple of vouchers and decided you could use them more this time around."

“You transferred your credits to me?” Deena was completely bowled over. She knew the Touch Massage & Day Spa was the elite spa in the city. A ginormous, heavily protected complex covering several acres with swimming pools, gyms, and things no one else talked about behind the three-story high facade of the building, molded from gold-tinted glass and gorgeous Roman accents and columns. It was, in truth, an architectural phenomenon with the blend of history and modern in tribute of the real Roman baths. That didn’t even count the three-hundred-room specialty hotel *behind* the spa that no one was allowed into without security checks -- and a bank account straight out of Hollywood. It was where the celebrities and countless politicians went for private service, and extreme seclusion.

She hadn’t known Sylvia was a regular there, or even a member. How could her friend afford this? She blinked at the question. She’d never known how much Sylvia made with her own thriving hair salon, but if she could afford this... It still made Deena’s brain stumble.

“Yup,” Sylvia quietly gloated in playful glee. “You’re going to love it.”

“Tomorrow?” Deena echoed, dazed, trying to figure out why her brain had suddenly decided to malfunction and disengage from her mouth. The page and business card blurred as she tried to digest the magnitude of her gift.

“You do like it, don’t you?” Sylvia asked, a worried note in her voice when Deena couldn’t form two coherent thoughts together.

“Oh! Yes! I love it. You just took me by surprise.”

“And it’s been ages since I’ve been able to do that.” She snorted, reaching for her wine and holding it up. “Happy birthday, Deena. You so need this.”

Deena found her wine on the table and clinked it delicately against her best friend’s glass. “Thank you.” Then she sipped at the delicious after-dinner dessert wine that had gone so well with her cake.

Now that same wine had turned sour on her tongue, she wondered how the hell she was going to beat this present at Sylvia’s next birthday get-together.