
Under the Summer Storms Additional Scene 2: The First Real Conversation

*S*ummer Storms is told through only Kiki's point of view. Kiki has been in love with Luke for years, and after turning herself into what she felt was his dream woman, she engineered a chance meeting with him. This is that night from Luke's perspective. As usual, my additional chapters are unedited so expect to see some errors.

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“Luke,” the voice calls out to me, just as I reach the foyer. I glance at my watch as discreetly as I can, trying not to make it obvious that I want to get away. Eight minutes past six. Freedom was so close.

“Matthew,” I acknowledge, giving my head of finance a smile.

“I’ve been trying to catch you all day,” he comments, taking the final strides towards me across the highly polished tiles of the foyer floor.

He’s an older man, somebody hired by my father when he was setting the company up. I’d wager he’s the longest serving employee. He’s exceptionally good at his job, shrewd and professional, but he seems to miss the perks he had when my father was around. Since I’ve stepped into his position, I’ve stopped some of the ‘old boys club’ mentality some employees had. Matthew is the only one who is desperate to try to get back to that.

“Is there a pressing matter?” I ask. A pressing matter could have been escalated to me through Joy, my PA. Nothing should ever require me being stopped as I try to exit the building, but I care enough to still stop.

“No, I was just hoping to get some time with you this week to discuss the latest results. I’ve got an idea that will really give us some strong gains in the current headwinds. It’s a moon-shot target but I know if we can capitalise on the current synergy, we can achieve it. I’m afraid it involves a bit of a restructure, but it’ll really move the needle.”

I half expect him to tell me it will just take some blue sky thinking, just to round off a bingo card of corporate buzz words. Why he can’t just say it in simple language is unfathomable. It isn’t difficult. *Luke, I have an idea that’ll make us profile that we never imagined for this year. If we pull together, we can defy the economic climate, but we may need to lay off a few staff, just for the sake of profit.*

“Why don’t you ask Joy to book a chat tomorrow? I’m sure she can find a slot in the diary,” I suggest.

Matthew nods at me and I push through the revolving door so I can get onto the street. Matthew follows me.

"I'll speak to Joy. I just want you to know, Luke, that your father would be proud of you making difficult decisions, keeping the company strong." Matthew smiles broadly at me.

"Which way are you going?" I ask, gesturing at the street. I am sure he lives in the opposite direction to me. If he suggests walking my way, I might just take a different route tonight. I need some peace and quiet, some solitude.

"I'm this way," he says, pointing away from where I'm going. I breath a quick sigh of relief.

"Have a great evening, Matthew."

"Yes, I better hurry home and see how the wife has spent my money today," he replies, chuckling. He pats me on the arm and then walks away.

I take a step away from the building, looking at how my family name is there for the world to see; something my father always told me was prestige but I've lately seen as a burden on my shoulders. I don't know how my father did it all; carried the weight of the responsibility to all the employees when making decisions on days like I've had today, and decisions like Matthew seems to want to suggest. It's been a long year, and an incredibly long day. All I want is to get home.

I take a step down the street, and I feel a little weird prickle of energy, like my body has sensed something that my brain hasn't yet communicated to me. I walk a little further and look up, and that's when I see her.

Kiera Kirkwood.

She's on the street a little further ahead of me, standing outside a coffee shop. She looks surprised to see me.

I take another step, and my brain and body seem to align. Kiera. Here. I've never been a man who believed in things like fate or destiny. I scoffed at it when I was younger. A man makes his own destiny.

Something I heard many times from my father and believed it. Yet... There's no way she's just *here*, in the exact right place at the exact right time, without something like fate. Fate... or a plan to make this happen.

I take another step and wonder if it's possible she's ever thought about me in the same ways that I've thought about her. Since my father's funeral, she's practically haunted me and my thoughts. At first, after that day where I saw her—really saw her—I did my best to avoid her. She unsettled me—or rather, the *promise* of her unsettled me. She was everything I knew I shouldn't want; but want I did. Somehow, she'd attached herself in my brain and I couldn't stop thinking about her, even when I scolded myself and chided about all the reasons it was wrong for me to think about her, for me to long to be with her.

I broke up with Clementine as I couldn't be with somebody when another woman had taken up residence in my mind. Despite that, I kept my distance from Kiera. I told myself she couldn't possibly think about me in the same way as I was thinking about her. Every admonishment I gave myself about why I shouldn't be thinking about her, I twisted it in my head and imagined it from her point of view.

She's far too young for you, Luke. I twisted that with her voice to the assessment she might make. *Oh, absolutely not, he's so old!*

She's Poppy's best friend, stay away, Luke. I twisted that with her voice, hearing her say things like *Oh, absolutely not. He's Poppy's brother, that's just disgusting, I would never go there.*

Worse, I imagined what it would be like if I had a friend who was thinking about Poppy the same way I couldn't stop thinking about Kiera. I imagined everything I'd say and how I'd try to intervene to keep them apart.

I've kept my distance. I showed up and saw her at times when it would be impossible to avoid the event; things like Poppy's twen-

ty-first birthday party, other family celebrations, times when I had to be in the same room as Kiera. In those situations, I've done my best to stay away from her.

It's been exhausting, and despite the physical distance I've tried to put between us, she's still stayed in my head. I hear her voice as I fall asleep. I see her in my dreams. Always longing for me to find her, to go to her, to give in to my temptation. I've fought it, with the belief that she wouldn't want me or anything I could offer.

Yet here she is. Kiera Kirkwood. Looking like a vision. My vision. More than that... my destiny. Thinking somebody is destiny is scary for a man who didn't believe in it.

I take the final steps towards her and take in her image. Her ginger hair hangs down her back, her blue eyes sparkle, and I don't know if she's wearing make up or is just always so flawlessly beautiful, but she looks like she should be on billboards as the face of a fashion house. Today, she's dressed in a royal blue dress, and I swear no colour has ever looked so perfect against her pale skin. Everything about her looks understated; from the delicate necklace that has a little gold heart, hanging just above the swell of her breasts, to the slim watch on her wrist.

I've known her for nine years, but this last year, she's been an entirely different person, and I'm too tired of telling myself that barriers like our age gap or her relationship with Poppy are immovable barriers. Kiera is the one who should decide that, and with her standing in front of me right now, it feels like she has maybe made that decision.

"Kiera, what on earth are you doing here?" I ask. I'm half hopeful that she'll tell me she has been plagued with thoughts about me in the same way as I have her.

Instead, she tells me about an assessment centre for a graduate placement that she's in the city for. I'm sure it's a lie. A graduate scheme is so far away from what I imagine she'd want as a career.

She's here for you, Luke.

Don't be an idiot.

But... what if?

The thoughts buzz in my head as she talks, and I catch a wave of her perfume. It's intoxicating. Soft, feminine, floral. I have a vision of her running through a meadow of beautiful flowers, blue hydrangeas. For a second, I'm stunned into silence.

"Has the company put on any evening entertainment? We sometimes do drinks if we have people from out of town for a two-day assessment centre," I ask once I've reconnected my brain. I don't know any company that runs a two-day assessment and doesn't provide evening entertainment, dinner and drinks. They all use it as an additional assessment opportunity, to see how people interact when they don't have their guard up and trying to present themselves as wonderful and professional.

When she tells me no, I feel the hope bloom in me further. It is no longer a little bubble, instead it solidifies. She isn't here for an assessment centre. She's stood outside my office building with an intention to see me. Me, without the noise of Poppy, Amelia or Jemma around.

The idea both terrifies and warms me. I don't want to embarrass her and tell her I know there is no assessment centre. I want to let this unfold organically; in whatever way she's planned.

I'm fairly sure she didn't plan just for a quick chat in the street, so I offer to take her for a drink. There's a little back and forth as she demurely tells me she doesn't want to impose. The way she holds my gaze seems to implore for me to insist she isn't imposing, so I do. When

she brings up the idea of a woman waiting for me to return home, any lingering doubt I had that she hasn't been thinking about me fades.

She knows I'm single, because Amelia gossips about me and Poppy like people breathe, she'd have told Kiera the moment I mentioned I had a date with another woman. Kiera's asking because she *wants* to know, because she wants me to know that she is interested in that information.

When Kiera agrees to a drink, I ponder for a second about where to take her. Everything in me tells me to take her somewhere fancy, beautiful, expensive. Somewhere she deserves to be. Somewhere where we can sit in private, eat and drink, shed off the roles we were allocated and get to know one another as people. Except, that feels like too much pressure for what is supposed to be an ad-hoc drink. We can do that another time.

I'm sure there will be another time.

Something tells me there will be a lifetime of 'another times', where drinks will evolve into everything more.

I settle on a bar I know that isn't far from the office. It's fancy without being overly grandiose and pompous. As we walk through the crowded streets, I put my hand onto the small of her back. She doesn't pull away from my touch.

"Poppy didn't tell me you would be in London," I comment.

I don't particularly want to talk about Poppy right now, to have her serve as a reminder to Kiera about the connection we both share, somebody who would likely roll her eyes and tell us to stop being gross if she even knew I was thinking about Kiera.

"I didn't tell her about the assessment centre. I was nervous," Kiera states.

It's another piece of the puzzle. Kiera's here without Poppy's knowledge. Whatever Kiera is feeling about me, it's clear she's kept

things to herself in the same way as I have. It's clear to me that this can be something we can explore together without Poppy, Amelia or Jemma meddling and commenting on. I'm grateful, because part of me wants to lock Kiera in a little bubble with me, to hold this feeling of awe and *rightness* in a suspended animation.

The way my body feels from a simple touch of my hand against the small of her back is a stark reprimand about why I waited so damn long to see if there was anything that could blossom between us, anything she could want to blossom. This simple gesture and connection of my hand against her feels like everything, a tantalising opening to what could be my greatest adventure.

"You shouldn't be nervous, Kiera. I'm surprised, though. I didn't think working in the big city was something you wanted," I comment as we walk.

"Perhaps I thought it best to have a career as I wait for my Prince Charming to arrive and let me settle into that life of domesticity," she jokes.

"You're far too young to be worrying about settling down." I chuckle.

That age gap again feels relevant, a little sour drip into the bliss I'm feeling. She's twenty-one. She has a whole life ahead of her where she can go on adventures and fall in love countless times. She doesn't want to think about settling down yet. I'm sure it's miles from her plans. It isn't that I've particularly been longing to settle down. I have been happy with my life; I enjoy the way I live. But, the dreams I've had about a life with Kiera, they've stirred something in me for months on end, and it's another reminder that we're probably in different places in our lives.

"You're never too young if you find the right person," Kiera comments.

“You are young, though,” I point out.

“I’m twenty-one, Luke. I’m an adult. I have been for a few years.”

There’s a determination in her tone, and I see her glance at me. Is she daring me to tell her that she’s too young and that I should just walk her back to her hotel? Or is she reminding me that she’s a grown woman, capable of making her own decisions, and that her choice to be here with me tonight is hers, one that nobody could convince her otherwise.

We arrive at the bar and when we get to the entrance, I’m surprised by how wrenching it feels to have to remove my hand from the small of her back so I can open the door for her. Even though the layer of her dress was between my skin and hers, I miss the connection.

I wonder what it would be like if she ever permitted me something more. How would I ever survive it, when it appears being in close proximity to her is enough to make me feel like I’ve found the missing piece in my life, something I don’t ever want to be separated from.

I guide Kiera to a free table, pulling a chair out for her to sit in. I take off my suit jacket, feeling far too overdressed in my expensive suit. As I take my own seat, I watch the little blush that spreads on Kiera’s cheeks. I have no idea what she’s thinking, what has set off that wave of heat, but I know I *want* to know. I want her to tell me every secret, every thought. I get a vision of the two of us, wrapped around one another, baring our souls and connecting in ways that could never be unpicked.

I force a smile and slide the menu of drinks towards her, grateful that we can both have a distraction. I order our drinks at the bar once she’s settled on her choice, and I take a deep breath when I’m at the bar, taking a moment to clear my thoughts. I stand with my back towards her as I order, but I can feel her presence. It’s like something within me is being pulled towards something within her.

I take the drinks back to the table, sitting across from her. She glances down at her drink, looking coy. Her fingers run up the stem of her glass, and I notice she is shaking a little. I wonder if I should reach over, touch her hand, try to steady her. Would that be welcomed?

I watch as she takes a little breath, looking not dissimilar to the one I took at the bar to steady me. Maybe she is as affected by me as I am by her.

We fall into an easy conversation. For the most part, I let her lead in the topics. She asks some insightful questions into my business and the things we are working on at the moment. She surprises me when she talks about a play she wants to see and a film that she has seen recently that she enjoyed, as the play is something I want to see, and I also enjoyed the show. We talk about literature, about art, about sports, about places she wants to travel and places I've been. There's never an ebb in topics or stilted air. The conversation feels so natural, and I realise I want to have so many other conversations with her, to know her opinions about everything, and how much I love that she's interested in mine.

We talk about everything except our families, like it's an unspoken vow to keep this magic going.

She nurses her drink and declines another when I offer. The little laugh she gives when I tell a joke makes me think of a magic musical box, making the sweetest sound.

It dawns on me that it has gotten late. I have at least an hours commute home, even without factoring in walking her back to her hotel.

"I think I'm going to have to cut this short, Kiera. I have an early start in the morning," I say, reluctant to end the night but knowing it is probably the right thing to do.

“Oh my goodness, I shouldn’t have kept you so long. I know you’re really busy,” she says.

“It’s been a busy year since Dad died,” I comment.

“Your father would be so proud of you and how hard you work. You’re a good man, Luke,” she tells me. It strikes me again how melodic her voice is, and the lure of it. It’s intoxicating, how she can call to me with words she hasn’t spoken. It’s like a beacon. *Come to me. Tell me all your secrets. Tell me your fears. Let me give you all the answers.*

I’m stunned. I’ve never felt like this before, ever. This is what fate must feel like. The moment where we’ve both travelled on various, separate journeys, to make ourselves into the people we are today, to arrive at this exact place and time and unite, being absolutely perfect for one another.

There is no doubt in my mind that she is the future. She is the woman I’m destined to be with. Now is the time to remove any ambiguity, to see if she wants to take this the next step with me.

I clear my throat. “Did you say you were staying in London another night?”

“Yes, I thought it made sense to stay rather than deal with the late-night trains,” she says.

“How would you feel about me taking you out for dinner tomorrow?” I ask. I hold my breath and then I inch my hand ever so slightly towards hers.

She has the most beautiful, serene expression on her face.

“That sounds like you’re asking me on a date.”

“What would you say if I am?” I stare at her, feeling like my fate hangs in the balance of her answer.

“I would say it sounds wonderful, and I’d be delighted to go out for dinner with you.”

I can't stop the broad smile that forms on my face when I hear her sweet answer. "Then it's a date."

We get up from the table. I put some money on the table for a tip, grateful that the staff let us monopolise the table and that they left us alone so we could have our conversation in peace. I guide Kiera back onto the street, surprised by how dark it is.

"Thank you for a lovely evening." She smiles as she turns to me and I shake my head. This night isn't over yet. It'll still be innocent, but I'm not about to let her wander the streets of London by herself.

"As if I'm letting you walk back to your hotel by yourself," I tut.

"So long as you don't get any ideas about seeing me into my room."

"I'll be a perfect gentleman and just see you to your door," I promise.

"Good, as I'm not that kind of girl," she says, and my smile gets a little wider. Although I'm imagining a great future with her, one filled with a lifetime of happiness, I know it doesn't start with me being improper or expecting more from her after a quick drink and catch up.

I want to woo her. I want to dazzle her and give her everything.

"I never thought you were."

She points in the direction of my hotel, surprisingly not far from wine bar. We take a slow stroll towards her hotel. I follow her in and through the winding corridors so I can walk her to the door of her hotel room. She rummages around in her bag for her key.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," she murmurs.

"You're welcome. Shall I pick you up here tomorrow, at seven?" I ask.

"Where do you have in mind? Just so I know to dress appropriately."

I think for a moment, discounting certain places that I want to take her because I don't know if she'll be prepared for anywhere too fancy. There's a beautiful restaurant I want to take her to, one with a beautiful and private dining room that I can usually book last minute—with an extortionate price tag attached—but they value a certain level of dress code.

"I do have a place in mind, but I'm assuming you didn't pack a fancy outfit," I say.

"You underestimate my ability to pick up something nice to wear when the occasion calls for it." She smiles and I'm taken by how her eyes seem to twinkle with amusement.

"Then dress for somewhere exclusive," I suggest, already thinking about the private dining room.

"I look forward to it. I shall see you tomorrow, Luke," she says.

I take a step towards her, listening as her breath hitches. She holds still and steady in front of me. I duck my head and give her a kiss on the cheek. I keep the kiss brief and chaste, trying to ignore how my heart pounds in my chest, how overwhelmed I feel at the feel of her skin, the scent of her, how much I want to pull her into my arms and kiss her until we both forget how to breathe properly.

I force myself to pull away from her cheek.

"I'm looking forward to it, too, Kiera," I whisper against her ear, and it takes everything in me to stand tall and walk away, leaving her at her hotel door. She feels like a siren, calling me back to her, telling me I'm finally home, that I'm hers. I carry on walking, back out of the hotel, planning the things I need to do for a perfect first date, one that will show Kiera I'm worth her attention and affection, and all the while, there is a smile on my face, and a joyful rhythm in my heart.

