

Julie stared at herself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror for a solid two minutes until her arms started to quiver and her back ached. Noting the fine web of lines around her eyes and the deteriorating condition of her skin in general, she groaned when she heard the command.

“Okay, Dawson, rest, thirty seconds.” The woman’s staccato orders made her wince.

“Fuck you.” She flopped to the mat in relief. At the tail end of her twice-weekly personal training session, she still could not dispel the memory of Evan Adams. The damn man was stuck in her brain. And no matter how many mental toothpicks she used, he would not budge. She’d told Tanya the evil trainer to ramp it up, really push her. But even the physical exhaustion didn’t help.

The whistle peeped, meaning she had another two-minute plank, then about a thousand sit-ups before she could collapse in the hot tub. It was late, nearly ten-thirty, but Julie knew herself well enough by now to accept that if she did not force this training, even at an ungodly hour, she would fall out of the habit and back into the “fat clothes” side of her closet.

So she ran, cycled, rode the elliptical, lifted weights, planked and crunched until she wanted to puke twice a week at a nearby fitness club about halfway between work and home and hated every blessed minute of it. Later, after roundly cursing Tanya through the gut-busting ab workout, she sat in the tub, brooding, letting the hot bubbles soothe her aching muscles. She trailed a manicured finger through the water as images of the man she’d met by accident and essentially treated like a peasant coming to the queen for scraps floated around in her brain.

Evan Adams certainly looked like everybody’s dream boy next door. On the tall side, probably six-foot-three or four, with a thick head of light brown hair and arresting hazel eyes and near-perfect bone structure which could have led him to modeling. He’d been dressed a little too casually for her taste, in tan pants, a blue dress shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and no tie.

A little too handsome for his own good in Julie’s opinion, he boasted an aura of something that made her scalp tingle the entire time she was tricking him into telling his company’s story when he thought he was flirting with the receptionist.

She sank down into the water, running her hands over her breasts and slightly flatter stomach – thanks to the bi-weekly torture session – and then lower. Then she stopped, berating herself.

You will not go there, Julie. He is just a man looking for your company to help him grow his brand and nothing more. Probably has a girlfriend tucked away somewhere, an adorable dental technician or ad salesgirl with some pseudo-career easily left behind when he bonked her over the head and dragged her down the aisle while simultaneously knocking her up.

She sighed and draped her arms along the sides of the tub.

Cynic much, Dawson? No, just been there, done that, to a certain extent. And yet...

Evan Adams...

She tapped her fingers on the sides of the hot tub, furious with herself for letting him become this weird, near-masturbatory obsession. Julie understood her power over men. She wielded it with a heavy hand. She had to. Running a giant beer and wine distribution company, turning it from a sick joke near bankruptcy into a place employing nearly a hundred people that turned a profit of over two million dollars last year, meant she was a ball-buster by trade.

She'd been trained by life itself to be the one in control all the time. And if ever asked, she would admit she loved it. Her power was hard-won and she never took it for granted. Most days. But her knee-jerk reaction to Evan, staring down his earnest elevator pitch at the end like he'd been a bug under her microscope, had probably been a bit... harsh.

Sighing as images of Evan's large, competent-looking hands and his broad shoulders kept poking at her lonely psyche, she rose, letting the water sluice off of her and grabbed one of the giant towels by the tub.

Enough, she said to herself firmly. *You went into full bitch mode on the guy, remember? He'll never darken your doorway again.*

After thirty years of life's bumpy ride, Julie Dawson trusted one thing: her instincts. And her gut had insisted Adams needed squashing, if for no other reason than to hold him at arms' length for her own protection.

So she'd crawled inside her own hand-crafted persona, fully realizing that if a man had stood there and used words like "tell me why my company would be interested in yours" it would not be seen as "bitchy," just "aggressively realistic."

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"Fucking idiots," Julie muttered as she stared at the email from one of her best suppliers. After reading the guy's message for the tenth time, she looked up and glared a hole in her assistant's face.

Paul merely blinked and said nothing. She sighed and started to put her elbow on the desk and in the process hit a cup of hours-cold coffee, knocking it into her lap.

"Perfect." But she was gratified to note at least the mess got the guy moving. He ran out and returned with a wad of paper towels. After letting him dab at her gingerly for a few seconds, she grabbed them from his hands. "Give me the god damn things." She stood, wondering just how ruined her new skirt was as she blotted the worst of it. "Stop hovering. Go get me a fresh cup. *Please*," she spat at the man, who hurried out of her presence.

Slumping in her seat, she spun around a few times and contemplated just how weird she'd felt the last few days. Unfocused, klutzy, more snappish than usual, although she figured the staff didn't notice that last one. She'd never been warm and fuzzy, even on her best days. But she paid a good wage and rewarded excellence generously so had very little turnover. She'd done her fair share of firing, but not in a while, and honestly believed at this moment she had the best sales and support staff she could buy.

Which was why the email from Kevin Lancaster, of Jackson Brewing Company, one of the very first and now biggest of her impressive book of products, making

accusations about her staff not working hard enough anymore for his company was so very odd. She let the small bit of protective fury that had been nestling in her brain since first reading the guy's message fade. Time for a come to Jesus meeting – or, as she knew her staff called it, a “come to Julie” meeting.

But her head stayed fuzzy in a wholly aggravating, moony way. She smacked her hand down on her desk to dispel it. When she picked it back up, she spotted Evan's card tucked half under her desk blotter. Frowning, she pulled it out and leaned back in her chair.

This was all his fault. She had met the guy once, fallen under some kind of stupid, girlie, lust trance, and now she hardly recognized her own thoughts. Ripping the thing into tiny pieces and tossing them into the bin under the desk felt great. As she did it, Julie forced herself to remember how she'd gotten here, what kept her here, and why it was important to never trust a member of the opposite sex.

“About time,” she said when a cup of coffee landed on her desk. “Okay, let's get real here.” She consulted her cheat sheet of accounts and salespeople. “I want the whole Jackson Brewing team in here, yesterday.” She glanced up. “You are still here, Paul. Why is that?” She smiled, and he nodded, making notes as he went. The guy was quiet, but it worked for her as long as he did his job. She'd never been chatty and wasn't about to start now.

A few hours later, they'd hashed out what went wrong at a few key large retail stores. Julie listened, and Paul took notes as the team discussed the issue – one she had to relay to the egomaniacal president of Jackson Brewing. The last few batches of their signature IPA and their stout had been bad. The team pulled the warehouse info and targeted the batch, which was indicated by date and time stamp on the cases.

Recalling something she'd seen a few days ago online, Julie pulled up a blog post about “trouble with Jackson” and shared it with them. Seems they had fired their brewer for some unknown reason and hired a new kid, and he had managed to fuck up some one hundred barrels – three thousand gallons – of Jackson's best beers. Customer complaints to the stores were piling up. And so the stores had slowed down their ordering.

Julie shook her head. “Listen, you guys have got to keep your ears closer to the ground on shit like this. If we had known about this a month ago...” She kept scrolling, looking for more recorded evidence or rumors of botched beer. “Christ almighty, this is a mess.”

But she knew now it was a brewery issue, even though her key salesmen on this very important account could have been paying a bit more attention to the grumbling. She stood, wincing at the soreness in her shoulders, hips, and thighs from her ramped-up workout program. All eyes went straight to the giant, obvious stain on her light blue skirt.

Julie wished at that moment she could kick them all out and call her friend Amy who would listen and remind her that a guy as good-looking as Evan Adams would stick with you, might even make you a little bubble headed for a while, and that she was fucking normal. Amy, with her two-point-five kids and suburban life, married to Tom the de-flowerer and now successful automotive engineer, was her touchstone, but Julie didn't call her much, not willing to admit how much she needed the support.

“Okay, I’m pretty sure this meeting is over. Go and talk to the Meijer and Spartan buyers. I’ll make the call to Jackson.” They nearly fell over each other leaving her office at her clear “get the fuck out” message.

The day dragged on, getting somehow, perversely, longer by the minute. She went through her mental and physical to-do lists, signed off on payroll and commission checks and other assorted busy work before picking up the phone to make the hard call to Kevin Lancaster. As expected, he spluttered, ranted and raved, insisting she didn’t know shit-all about beer and had no business accusing him of bad quality. She sent him an email with links to the blog with over fifty comments, the majority of which agreed the last Jackson Brewing beer they had was either "skunky" or "tasted like Band-Aids."

By the time she hung up, Julie felt like she had been through a wringer. She flopped back in her chair, tugged her shirt out of her definitely ruined skirt, and unbuttoned her sleeves, her skin hot from the confrontation on the phone. Her feet ached and her calves were starting to cramp up when she remembered she had skipped lunch.

“Paul! Go grab me a sandwich down the street, will ya? I need to stick here for at least another hour.” She kicked off her shoes and started rubbing the arch of one foot.

“Hey.” The voice she heard was most definitely not Paul’s. As a matter of fact, it was the voice she had been spending the better part of the past week trying to shove out of her head.

She shut her eyes, keeping her chair turned from the door and taking inventory of how wilted, coffee-stained, smelly she must be. But her skin pebbled, and a strange humming noise had started in her ears, which made her even madder and more inclined to ignore his sexy, low, bedroom voice.

“What do you want?” She thought about tucking her shirt back in, pulling her hair out of its lame ponytail and sticking her feet back in her shoes. For about three seconds. “My week-long silence not enough to convince you I’m not interested? I mean, in your brewery?” She willed him out of her office.

“I brought you something,” he said.

She turned slowly, her heart pounding so hard she thought she could see her shirt move.

“I don’t want anything you have.” Deciding to keep the whole conversation dialed to double entendre just to show him she could handle it, she leaned on her desk, knowing full well that he could see the tops of her D-cups down her shirt. But he smiled in a calm way that made her repress a shiver and kept his eyes right on hers. “Spare me the charm-fest Adams. I’m immune. What is it? I’m busy.”

“May I?” He indicated the seat across from her desk.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. He took that as a “yes” and walked in. Evan Adams was dressed in a way she’d remember today – his charcoal gray suit was accented by a deep blue shirt and nearly identically colored tie. His black wingtips shone, and she noted with admiration the splash of brightness in the form of a snappy blue silk handkerchief in the suit pocket. Her knees shook. The man was positively edible. But the look he shot her told her he knew it. And that brought a soothing, familiar bite of cynicism to her overwrought brain.

He plunked two six-pack carriers on her desk, one his, and the other emblazoned with none other than the Jackson Brewing Company's logo. She leaned over and pulled up bottles of each, noting there were three different types of beer from both his and Jackson's brewery in his offering.

"I'm not in the mood for a drink, but thanks anyway." She pushed back from the desk and put her bare feet on it daring him to comment. Her legs were bare and her skirt short. To his credit he did not rise to her bait.

Keeping his eyes pinned to hers, Evan reached down and opened first one of his, then one of Jackson's bottles. The tempting hops aroma filled the space between them. He set small clear plastic cups next to the sixers, then poured some of each brew into two of the cups. She watched as he pushed them in front of her before leaning back, his gaze calm.

She raised an eyebrow at him, then decided not to be obtuse and tasted first Jackson's then the Big House version, which she had never tried. The difference was astonishing. But she was not about to let him know that.

"Okay, thanks for the taste test. You can go now."

"Hang on. Not done yet." He popped open the next two bottles, both classic American stouts, poured her a portion of each and stood so he could place them closer to her.

She frowned, then shrugged and tasted them, coming to the same shocking conclusion. But she kept her face neutral, bored – although the longer he stayed in her space, the harder it was not to match his smile.

The final two brews were the most challenging: black IPAs, which in her opinion were roastier versions of the same-old, heavy-handed, over-hopped trendy bullshit. Jackson's version was exactly that. But the balanced and less dense version from Big House made her sit up and take notice. She stared at it, took another taste.

"You filter, eh?"

"Yep." He leaned back, propped one ankle on the opposite knee, forcing her to recite an inner mantra to keep from looking straight at his crotch. She knew he was showing off what was a near-perfect male physique. But two could play at that little game.

She smiled, tugged her hair out of the holder and shook it, letting the waves cascade down her back and around her face. Then she stood and took a few steps over to the large window overlooking a tidy courtyard.

The late October afternoon was easing towards evening giving her the perfect angle of light. She held on to the last cup of beer, still marveling at its perfection, and turned, leaning against the ledge. Sucking back the last drops of the small sample, she made a noise that she knew damn well could pass for very personal pleasure, then looked right at him.

"Impressive. I will give you that. And ballsy, coming in here without an appointment to make me drink beer I didn't ask for." She allowed herself a moment to rake her eyes across his shoulders, down his torso, and right at his zipper.

He blinked, no longer sporting his Mr. Perfect grin. She put her hands on the ledge and leaned in again. The power bloomed in her once more, making her mad this time when his eyes fluttered down for a split second into the top of her blouse. The

roaring, conflicted noise in her head kept deafening her as they stared at each other for a few seconds.

Julie had long buried any sort of real sexuality. But she could reduce most men to their lowest common denominator fairly quickly. Evan had held his own, and she would have let it be but for the vibe he was throwing – the one that spoke directly to a long-buried sensation in her gut where an utterly bizarre, melting feeling had taken up residence. She blinked and broke the contact first, sitting up and plucking the empty cup from the ledge.

But her knees shook as she tried to stay cool between window and chair. When her toe connected solidly with a chair leg, she cursed. Unwanted tears welled in her eyes. She turned from him, blinking and trying to breathe.

“I’ll take these samples to the staff tomorrow. Thanks,” she said, waving a dismissive hand in his general direction and dropping into her desk chair. She clenched her jaw and stared into the setting sun, letting it burn circles into her retinas, hoping he would just go and leave her to her misery. Her toe throbbed like a motherfucker, and her head was starting to pound from lack of food plus afternoon alcohol. A hand on her knee made her jump.

To her utter shock and horror, Evan Adams was kneeling in front of her and had his hand on her foot.

“Let me see it,” he said, his voice calm, soothing instead of rattling her. She watched herself, amazed even as she let go of her foot and allowed him to draw it into his lap as he sat at her feet. Wincing when he moved it, she yelped when he pressed on the red-painted nail. He seemed hypnotized by it by it as he held in his large palm.

They both watched now as his hand moved to her ankle and slowly up her calf. He got to his knees. Julie leaned back and let him slide that hand up and up past her knee, gulping when he stopped just under the edge of her coffee-fouled skirt.

He seemed as confused as she was to find himself there, his fingertips mere inches from her panties. A powerful shudder made her close her eyes, grip the arms of her chair as if in pain. But it *was* painful, she mused, outside herself and observing, as a man who was in essence a handsome be-suited but total stranger leaned close, putting his full lips right up to hers. His hand stayed put, hot and heavy on her leg.

She tried not to shift, to force it higher before she exploded. Pulses of light and energy shot across her vision. He moved, pressed closer, and the smell of his cologne made her eyes fly open. This was not happening, not to her. Not with this man whom she sensed could not only rock her but would also tear her heart into a million pieces before he was done. The power in her shriveled, retreated to a corner, and a totally different sensation flooded her nerve endings.

She stiffened, her eyes hot, her throat as dry as a bone. His other hand was at her face, his thumb moving over her lips, making her part them and pant like a slut. Again his cologne passed through her, triggering a visceral reaction at odds with the pleasant realization the man was about to kiss her.

“Open your eyes.” His whisper was right at her ear. It curled there like smoke. She tried to breathe, shook her head, not remembering when she’d closed them. “Now, Julie. Look at me.”

The surety of that voice compelled her so strongly she fought it on reflex. She would not be ordered around like a...

The hand on her thigh tightened, making her gasp. She opened her eyes and was hit once more by the perfection of his face and the puzzled look she saw on it. She gripped the chair arms harder, because if she didn't, she'd have her hands on his afternoon-rough jaw. They froze like this, in an awkward tableau, her reared back, him looming over her, his hand halfway up her damn skirt.

Julie gave herself a firm mental shake. As she started to put her trembling hands on his chest to push him away, he brushed her lips with his, just enough. And now she really could not breathe. His lips and tongue went slowly, testing her resolve versus her need. The chair beneath her disappeared, the brightly lit room darkened as she eased her lips open just a bit.

But that cologne, it swirled in her head, made her dizzy and terrified at once. A weird claustrophobia enveloped her and the dizziness morphed into nauseating fear. This was not what she did. This was not part of her plan. She propped her feet against his thighs and pushed the wheeled chair away from him, leaving him off-balance, teetering until he dropped to all fours, still staring at her with eyes that made her want to rip his goddamn suit off. She clenched her jaw, throat frozen with unsaid words.

He crawled toward her at some point, put his hands on hers that still white-knuckled the chair arms. "You okay?" His voice was hoarse. She kept her eyes shut a second. Then opened them when she was ready.

He was there, kissable, close once more. She smiled, but kept her voice firm. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

He blinked, backed away from her, as if a veil was dropped between them. His odd but beautiful hazel eyes clouded with something she thought could be anger. He stood, stepped back so fast he stumbled and nearly fell over her wastepaper basket. She watched him in dismay as he ran his hands through his hair, buttoned his coat, mesmerized by a sudden drop of sweat that appeared at his temple. Dear Lord, but she wanted to lick it off. He kept moving backwards, as if disgusted by her. She resisted the urge to sniff under her arms.

"Julie... I'm so sorry. I'm... Jesus, that was... I don't know what got into me." He kept swallowing and sweating and looking so stressed she started to get a little worried about him. Finally, he hit the door, grabbed the handle, and yanked it open only looking back once.

She had not moved during his strange freak-out, realized her palms hurt from hanging onto the damn chair, and her legs were splayed as if his hand were still between them, creeping up to touch her in ways she somehow knew would be exactly right. He looked back once more, and this time his eyes bore something like real sadness. She started to say something. But he spoke first.

"Forgive me. It won't happen again." Then he was gone, as if that whole incredible almost-moment had never happened.

She sat, mouth hanging open, the scents of open, warming beer, the cologne that had made her nearly retch, and the undeniable musk of two adults ready to fuck rolling around in her head.

“Hey, Julie, I got your...” Paul stood in the door, low-cal turkey wrap in hand, taking in the overturned garbage, the six open beers, and her shoved up against the wall in her chair looking like she’d just been manhandled. She glared at him. He put the sandwich and water down and retreated. But it left her on the verge of tears, thinking she’d call Amy, who would put her mind at ease about the way her body clamored for more from Evan Adams. And how the look in his eyes told her he would never touch her again. But something made her want to savor the moment, alone, for a bit longer, trying to sort it all out.

