

THE KISS QUOTIENT

By

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Chapter 1

“I know you hate surprises, Stella. In the interests of communicating our expectations and providing you a reasonable timeline, you should know we’re ready for grandchildren.”

Stella Lane’s gaze jumped from her breakfast up to her mother’s well-aged face. A subtle application of make-up drew attention to battle-ready, coffee-colored eyes. That boded ill for Stella. When her mother got something into her mind, she was like a honey badger with a vendetta—pugnacious and tenacious, but without the snarling and fur.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Stella said.

Shock gave way to rapid-fire, panic-scrambled thoughts. Grandchildren meant babies. And diapers. Mountains of diapers. Exploding diapers. And babies cried, soul-grating banshee wails that even the best sound-cancelling headphones couldn’t buffer. How did they cry so long and hard when they were so little? Plus, babies meant husbands. Husbands meant boyfriends. Boyfriends meant dating. Dating meant *sex*. She shuddered.

“You’re thirty, Stella dear. We’re concerned that you’re still single. Have you tried Tinder?”

She grabbed her water and gulped down a mouthful, accidentally swallowing an ice cube. After clearing her throat, she said, “No. I haven’t tried it.”

The very thought of Tinder—and the corresponding dating it aimed to deliver—caused her to break out in a sweat. She hated everything about dating: the departure from her comfortable routine, the conversation that was by turns inane and baffling, and again, the *sex*...

“I’ve been offered a promotion,” she said, hoping it would distract her mother.

“Another one?” her father asked, lowering his paper copy of the Wall Street Journal so his wire-framed glasses were visible. “You were just promoted two quarters ago. That’s phenomenal.”

Stella perked up and scooted to the edge of her seat. “Our newest client—a large online vendor who shall not be named—provided the most amazing datasets, and I get to play with them all day. I designed an algorithm to help with some of their purchase suggestions. Apparently, it’s working better than expected.”

“When is the new promotion effective?” her father asked.

“Well...” The hollandaise and egg yolk from her crabcakes Benedict had run together, and she attempted to separate the yellow liquids with the tip of her fork. “I didn’t accept the promotion. It was a Principal Econometrician position that would have had five direct reports beneath me and require much more client interaction. I just want to work on the data.”

Her mother batted that statement away with a negligent wave of her hand. “You’re getting complacent, Stella. If you stop challenging yourself, you’re not going to make any more improvement with your social skills. That reminds me, are there any coworkers at your company who you’d like to date?”

Her father set his newspaper down and folded his hands over his rounded belly. “Yes, what about that one fellow, Philip James? When we met him at your last company get together, he seemed nice enough.”

Her mother’s hands fluttered to her mouth like pigeons homing in on breadcrumbs. “Oh, why didn’t I think of him? He was so polite. And easy on the eyes, too.”

“He’s okay, I guess.” Stella ran her fingertips over the condensation on her water glass. To be honest, she’d considered Philip. He was conceited and abrasive, but he was a direct speaker. She really liked that in people. “I think he has several personality disorders.”

Her mother patted Stella’s hand. Instead of putting it back in her lap when she was done, she rested it over Stella’s knuckles. “Maybe he’ll be a good match for you then, dear. With issues of his own to overcome, he might be more understanding of your Asperger’s.”

Though the words were spoken in a matter-of-fact tone, they sounded unnatural and loud to Stella’s ears. A quick glance at the neighboring tables in the restaurant’s canopied outdoor dining area reassured her that no one had heard, and she stared down at the hand on top of hers, consciously refraining from yanking away. Uninvited touches irritated her, and her mother knew it. She did it to “acclimate” her. Mostly, it drove Stella crazy. Was it possible Philip could understand this?

“I’ll think about him,” Stella said, and meant it. She hated lying and prevaricating even more than she hated sex. And, at the end of the day, she wanted to make her mother proud and happy. No matter what Stella did, she was always a few steps short of being successful in her mother’s eyes and therefore her own, too. A boyfriend would do that, she knew. The problem was she couldn’t keep a man for the life of her.

Her mother beamed. “Excellent. The next benefit dinner I’m arranging is in a couple months, and I want you to bring a date this time. I’d love to see Mr. James attending with you, but if that doesn’t work out, I’ll find someone.”

Stella thinned her lips. Her latest sexual experience had been with one of her mother’s blind dates. He’d been good-looking—she had to give him that—but his sense of humor had confused her. With him being a venture capitalist and her being an economist, they should have had a lot in common, but he hadn’t wanted to talk about his actual work. Instead, he’d preferred to discuss office politics and manipulation tactics, leaving her so lost she’d been certain the date

was a failure.

When he'd straight-out asked her if she wanted to have sex with him, she'd been caught completely off guard. Because she hated to say no, she'd said yes. There'd been kissing, which she didn't enjoy. He'd tasted like the lamb he'd had for dinner. She didn't like lamb. His cologne had nauseated her, and he'd touched her all over. As it always did in intimate situations, her body had locked down. Before she knew it, he'd finished. He'd discarded his used condom in the trashcan next to the hotel room's desk—that had bothered her, surely he should know things like that went in the bathroom?—told her she needed to loosen up, and left. She could only imagine how disappointed her mother would be if she knew what a disaster her daughter was with men.

And now her mother wanted babies, too.

Stella got to her feet and gathered her purse. "I need to go to work now." While she was ahead on all her deadlines, *need* was still the right word for it. Work fascinated her, channeled the furious craving in her brain. It was also therapeutic.

"That's my girl," her father said, standing up and brushing off his silk Hawaiian shirt before hugging her. "You're going to own that place before long."

As she gave him a quick hug—she didn't mind touching when she initiated it or had time to mentally prepare for it—she breathed in the familiar scent of his aftershave. Why couldn't all men be just like her father? He thought she was beautiful and brilliant, and his smell didn't make her sick.

"You know her work is an unhealthy obsession, Edward. Don't encourage her," her mother said before she switched her attention to Stella and heaved a maternal sigh. "You should be out with people on the weekend. If you met more men, I know you'd find the right one."

Her father pressed a cool kiss to her temple and whispered, "I wish I were working, too."

Stella shook her head at him as her mother embraced her. The ropes of her mother's ever-present pearls pressed into Stella's sternum, and Chanel No. 5 swirled around her. She tolerated

the cloying scent for three long seconds before stepping back.

“I’ll see you both next weekend. I love you. Bye.”

She waved at her parents before exiting the ritzy, downtown Palo Alto restaurant and walked down sidewalks lined with trees and upscale shops. After three sunny blocks, she reached a low-rise office building that housed her favorite place in the world: her office. The left corner window on the third floor belonged to her.

The lock on the front door clicked open when she held her purse up to the sensor, and she strode into the empty building, enjoying the solitary echo of her high heels on the marble as she passed the vacant reception desk and stepped into the elevator.

Inside her office, she initiated her most beloved routine. First, she powered on her computer and entered her password into the prompt screen. As all the software booted up, she plopped her purse in her desk drawer and went to fill her cup with water from the kitchen. Her shoes came off, and she placed them in their regular spot under her desk. She sat.

Power, password, purse, water, shoes, sit. Always this order.

Statistics Analysis System, otherwise known as SAS, automatically loaded, and the three monitors on her desk filled with streams of data. Purchases, clicks, log-in times, payment types—simple things, really. But they told her more about people than people themselves ever did. She stretched out her fingers and set them on the black ergonomic keyboard, eager to lose herself in her work.

“Oh hi, Stella, I thought it might be you.”

She looked over her shoulder and was jarred by the unwelcome view of Philip James peering around the doorframe. The severe cut of his tawny hair emphasized his square jaw, and his polo shirt was tight across his chest. He looked fresh, sophisticated, and smart—precisely the kind of man her parents wanted for her. And he’d caught her working for pleasure on the weekend.

Her face heated, and she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “What are you doing here?”

“I had to pick up something that I forgot yesterday.” He extracted a box from a shopping bag and waved it at her. Stella caught sight of the word Trojan in giant capital letters. “Have a nice weekend. I know I will.”

Breakfast with her parents raced through her mind. Grandchildren, Philip, the prospect of more blind dates, being successful. She licked her lips and hurried to say something, *anything*. “Did you really need an economy-sized box of those?”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she winced.

He smirked his assholest smirk, but its annoyingness was softened by a show of strong white teeth. “I’m pretty sure I’m going to need half of these tonight since the boss’s new intern asked me out.”

Stella was impressed despite herself. The new girl looked so shy. Who would have thought she was so gutsy? “For dinner?”

“And more, I think,” he said with a twinkle in his hazel eyes.

“Why did you wait for her to ask you out? Why didn’t you ask her first?” She’d gotten the impression men liked to be initiators in matters like these. Was she wrong?

With impatient motions, Philip stuffed an entire militia of Trojans back in his shopping bag. “She’s fresh out of undergrad. I didn’t want to get accused of cradle robbing. Besides, I like girls who know what they want and go for it...especially in bed.” He swept an appraising gaze from her feet to her face, smiling like he could see through her clothes, and she stiffened with self-consciousness. “Tell me, are you still a virgin, Stella?”

She turned back to her computer screens, but the data refused to make sense. The cursor in the programming screen blinked. “It’s none of your business, but no, I’m not a virgin.”

He walked into her office, leaned a hip against her desk, and considered her in a skeptical

manner. She adjusted her glasses even though they didn't need it. "So our star econometrician has 'done it' before. How many times? Three?"

No way was she going to tell him he'd guessed correctly. "None of your business, Philip."

"I bet you just lay there and run linear recursions in your head while a man does his business. Am I right, Ms. Lane?"

Stella would totally do that if she could figure out how to input gigabytes of data into her brain, but she'd rather die than admit it.

"A word of advice from a man who's been around the block a few times: Get some practice. When you're good at it, you like it better, and when you like it better, men like *you* better." He pushed away from the desk and headed for the door, his bag of condoms swinging jauntily at his side. "Enjoy your endless week."

As soon as he left, Stella stood up and shoved her door shut, using more force than was necessary. The door slammed with a hard, vibrating bang, and her heart stuttered. She smoothed damp hands over her pencil skirt as she brought her breathing back under control. When she sat down at her desk, she was too jittery to do more than stare at the blinking cursor.

Was Philip right? Did she dislike sex because she was bad at it? Would practice really make perfect? What a beguiling concept. Maybe sex was just another interpersonal thing she needed to exert extra efforts on—like casual conversation, eye contact, and etiquette.

But how exactly did you practice sex? It wasn't like men were throwing themselves at her like women apparently did to Philip. When she did manage to sleep with a man, they were so put off by the lackluster experience once was more than enough for both of them.

Also, this was Silicon Valley, the kingdom of tech geniuses and scientists. The single men available were probably as hopeless in bed as she was. With her luck, she'd sleep with a statistically significant population of them and have nothing to show for it but crotch burn and

STDs.

No, what Stella needed was a professional.

Not only were they certified disease-free, but they had proven track records. At least, she assumed so. That was how she'd run things if she were in that business. Regular men were incentivized by things like personality, humor, and hot sex—things she didn't have. Professionals were incentivized by money. Stella happened to have a lot of money.

Instead of working on her shiny new dataset, Stella opened up her internet browser and Googled, “California Bay Area male escort service.”

Chapter 2

Which envelope should he open first? The lab results or the bill? Michael was paranoid about protection, so the lab results should be good. Should be. In his experience, shit didn't need a reason to happen. Bills, on the other hand, were a sure thing. They always sucked. The only question was how hard they'd punch him in the balls.

Tensing his muscles for impact, he tore open the bill. How much was it this month? He scanned to the bottom of the itemized invoice and located the final amount. The breath trickled from his lungs before it gusted out. Not horrible. On the scale of stinging to pulverizing, he'd put this one at merely bruising.

That probably meant he'd contracted Chlamydia.

He set the bill down on top of the metal filing cabinet nestled behind his kitchen table and opened the lab results from his latest STD screening. All negative. Thank fuck. It was Friday evening again, which meant he needed to work tonight.

Time to get himself in the mindset for fucking. Not any easy thing to do after thinking about STDs and plaguing bills. For an instant, he let himself imagine what things would be like if the bills came to an end. He'd be free at last. He could return to his old life and—shame doused him. No, he didn't want the bills to end. He never wanted that to happen. Never.

As Michael padded through his cheap apartment toward the bathroom and shed his clothes, he tried to revive his old enthusiasm for this job. The taboo nature of it had been enough in the beginning, but after three years of escorting, that was pretty much old hat. The revenge aspect still satisfied him though.

Look at your only son now, Dad.

It would torment his dad if he found out Michael was having sex for money. A thoroughly delightful thought. Not an arousing one, however. That was what fantasies were for.

He mentally sifted through his favorites. What was he in the mood for tonight? *Hot for Teacher?* *Neglected Housewife?* *Secret Lover?*

He cranked the shower knob and waited for steam to cloud the air before climbing beneath the hot spray. A breath in, a breath out, and he readied his mind. What was the name of tonight's client again? Shanna? Estelle? No, Stella. He'd bet twenty dollars that wasn't her real name, but whatever. She'd chosen to pay up front. He'd try to do something extra nice for her. *Hot for Teacher* then.

It was his freshman year of college. He skipped all of his lectures but this one because Ms. Stella liked to drop the chalkboard eraser right by his chair. Picturing her skirt riding up as she bent down to retrieve the eraser, he gripped his cock and stroked with firm motions. When class ended, he draped her facedown over her desk and bunched her skirt up to her waist to reveal she wasn't wearing panties. He plunged into her hard and fast. If someone walked in on them...

With a groan, he yanked his hand away before he could fly over the edge. He was primed and ready to see Ms. Stella outside of class.

He kept his mind locked in the fantasy as he finished with his shower, dried off, and left the bathroom to pull on jeans, a T-shirt, and a black sports coat. A quick look in the half-fogged mirror and two swipes of his fingers through his damp hair confirmed he was presentable.

Condoms, keys, wallet. Out of habit, he reread the special comments section of tonight's assignment on his phone.

Please don't wear cologne.

That was easy. He didn't like the stuff in the first place. He slipped his phone into his pockets along with everything else and left his apartment.

It wasn't long before he parked in the underground lot of the Clement Hotel. As he strolled into the sleek, ultra-modern lobby, he made sure the lapels of his coat were down and

played his usual pre-meet-and-greet game where he imagined what his new client was like.

Under Client Age for tonight, it had said thirty. He sighed and corrected the age to fifty. Anything younger than forty was always a lie—unless it was a group thing, which he didn't do. Bachelorette parties paid well, but the idea of destroying young love depressed the hell out of him. Maybe it was pathetic, but he wanted to live in a world where brides-to-be only had sex with their grooms-to-be and vice versa. Besides, large groups of horny women were terrifying. You couldn't defend yourself against them, and their nails were sharp.

“Stella” could be a pampered fifty who indulged in sweets, spas, and frou-frou canines, was therefore decadently rounded, and preferred to be worshipped in bed—something Michael had no problem with. She could also be a fit fifty who liked yoga, green juice, and marathon sex sessions that worked his abs better than weighted incline crunches. Or, his least favorite, she could be a hardass Asian go-getter who chose him because, with his mixed Vietnamese and Swedish heritage, he looked a lot like the kdrama star Daniel Henney. This last kind of woman inevitably reminded him of his mom, and after sleeping with them, he needed therapy with a punching bag.

Entering the hotel restaurant, he searched the dimly lit tables for a brown-haired, brown-eyed woman wearing glasses. Because he'd gotten through his mail without major incident earlier, he braced himself for the worst now. His gaze skipped over tables occupied by businessmen until he saw a solitary, middle-aged Asian woman micromanaging the waitress on how to make her salad. When she brushed manicured nails through her lightened brown hair, his stomach sank and he began walking toward her. It was going to be a long night.

No, this was the culmination of a semester's worth of sexual tension. They both wanted this. He wanted this.

Before he could reach her, a reed-thin older man took the seat opposite her and covered her hand with his. Confused but relieved, Michael stepped back and surveyed the restaurant

again. No one was sitting alone...but for a girl in the far corner.

Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and sexy librarian type glasses were balanced on a cute little nose. In fact, from what he could see of her, everything looked like it had been chosen from a sexy librarian cosplay. She wore neat pointed pumps, a grey pencil skirt, and a fitted white oxford shirt buttoned clear up to her throat. It was possible she was thirty, but Michael put her at twenty-five. There was something young and wholesome about her, though her frown was rather fierce as she scrutinized the menu.

Michael glanced about the room, searching for a hidden camera team or his friends cracking up behind the potted plants. He found neither of those things.

He closed his hands around the back of the chair across from her. “Excuse me, are you Stella?”

Her eyes shot to his face, and Michael lost his train of thought. Those sexy librarian glasses showcased the most stunning pair of soft brown eyes. And her lips—they were just full enough to be tempting without detracting from her overall air of sweetness.

“I’m sorry. I must have the wrong person,” he said with a smile he hoped was more apologetic and less embarrassed. There was no way a girl like this had hired an escort.

She blinked and jostled the table as she flew to her feet. “No, that’s me. You’re Michael. I recognize you from your picture.” She stuck her hand out. “I’m Stella Lane. Nice to meet you.”

He stared at her open expression and proffered hand for a stunned fraction of a second. This wasn’t how clients greeted him. They usually waved him into a seat with a sly curl of their lips and a sparkle in their eyes—that sparkle that said they thought they were better than him but were looking forward to what he could offer anyway. She greeted him like he was...an equal.

Quickly recovering from his surprise, he wrapped her slender hand in his and shook it. “Michael Phan. Nice to meet you, too.”

When he released her, she motioned toward his chair awkwardly. “Please, have a seat.”

He sat and watched as she perched herself on the precarious edge of her seat, her back straight as a board. She searched his face, but when he arched an eyebrow at her, she switched her focus to the menu. She adjusted the position of her glasses with a wrinkle of her nose.

“Are you hungry? I am.” Her knuckles went white as she clung to the menu. “The salmon is good here, and the steak. My dad likes the lamb—” Her gaze jumped to his face, and, even in the dim light, he could see her cheeks go crimson. She cleared her throat. “Maybe not the lamb.”

Because he couldn't resist, he asked, “Why not the lamb?”

“I think it tastes woolly, and if you...when we...” She stared up at the ceiling and took a deep breath. “All I'd be thinking about would be sheep and lambs and wool.”

“Understood,” he said with a grin.

When she stared at his mouth like she couldn't remember what she was going to say, his grin widened. Women chose him because they liked the way he looked. Few of them responded to him like this, however. It was flattering even as it was funny.

“Are there any things you would prefer *I* not eat or drink?” she asked.

“No, I'm pretty easy.” He kept his voice light and tried to ignore the tightness in his chest. It had to be heartburn. Simple thoughtfulness wasn't doing this to him.

After the waitress took their order and left, Stella sipped from her water glass and drew geometrical shapes in the condensation with delicate fingertips. When she noticed him watching her, she drew her hand back and sat on it, flushing like she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't.

Something about that was kind of endearing. If she hadn't already paid, he wouldn't believe she actually wanted this. Why did she want this? She should have a boyfriend...or a husband. Against his better judgement—it was best when he didn't know—he looked at her left hand resting on the table. No ring. No white line.

“I have a proposition for you,” she said suddenly, pinning him with a gaze that was

surprisingly direct. “It would require a commitment of sorts—for the next couple months, I imagine. I would...prefer...to have sole access to you during that time. If you’re available.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Please tell me if you’re available first.”

“I only do Friday nights.” That was non-negotiable. Escorting once a week was bad enough. If he had to do it more than that, he’d lose his fucking mind, and he couldn’t afford for that to happen. Too many people depended on him.

He never scheduled repeat appointments with the same client, either. They tended to get attached, and he couldn’t stand that. But he wanted to hear what she was proposing before he declined.

“You have the next few months open then?” she asked.

“It depends on what you’re proposing.”

She pushed her glasses up her nose and drew her shoulders back. “I’m awful at...what you do. But I want to get better. I think I can get better if someone would teach me. I’d like that person to be you.”

Understanding splashed over Michael in surreal waves. She thought she was bad. At sex. And wanted lessons to improve. She wanted him to tutor her.

How the hell did you teach sex?

“I think we should do a trial run before we set anything up,” Michael hedged. She couldn’t actually be bad at sex, and she’d already paid. At the very least, he had to give her tonight.

Frowning, she nodded. “You’re absolutely right. We should establish a baseline.”

A grin tugged at his lips again. “Are you a scientist, Stella?”

“Oh, no. I’m an economist. More precisely, I’m an econometrician.”

In Michael’s book, that put her solidly in the brainiac category, and an odd feeling

ghosted up the back of his neck. Damned if he didn't have a thing for smart girls. There was a reason why his favorite fantasy was *Hot for Teacher*. "I don't know what that is."

"I use statistics and calculus to model economic systems. Do you know how when you buy something online they usually email you with future recommendations? I help them formulate those recommendations. It's a very fluid and fascinating field right now." As she spoke, she leaned toward him, and her eyes lit with excitement. Her lips curved like she was telling him a secret. About math things. "Today's material is completely different from what I used to teach when I was in graduate school."

That odd feeling simmering up Michael's spine increased in intensity. She'd somehow gotten prettier during the course of their discussion. Brown eyes and thick lashes, pouty lips, delicate jaw, vulnerable neck. Vivid images of him unfastening the buttons of her shirt flashed in his mind.

But unlike usual, he didn't want to do it quickly. He didn't want to skip straight to the fucking, get out, and go home. This girl was different. It was that spark in her eyes. He wanted to take his time and see if he could make her shine with a different kind of excitement. His cock dug at the fly of his jeans, dragging Michael back to the here and now.

His skin had gone hot and sensitive, and his pulse thrummed with eagerness. He hadn't been this turned on in forever. And he hadn't been fantasizing she was someone else. He reminded himself this was business. His personal wants and needs didn't play into this at all. This assignment was just like any other, and when it was done, he'd move on to the next.

He took a deep breath and said the first thing he could think of. "Were you on the math team in high school?"

She laughed down at her water. "No."

"Science club? Maybe it was chess club."

"No, and no." Her smile was a sad, barely-there thing that made him wonder what high

school had been like for her. Looking back up at him, she said, “Let me guess, football quarterback.”

“Nope. My dad was a firm believer that sports are stupid.”

Her brow wrinkled with a little frown. “I find that difficult to believe. You’re very...athletic looking.”

“He only encouraged practical things. Like self-defense.” He hated to agree with his dad on anything, but with the family business being what it was, and his helping out with it, the techniques had come in handy when shit kids teased him.

A discovering kind of smile lit her face. “What do you do? MMA? Kung Fu? Jeet Kun Do?”

“I’ve done a little of everything. Why do you sound like you actually know what you’re talking about?”

Her gaze dropped back down to her water. “I like martial arts movies and things like that.”

He groaned as suspicion dawned. “Don’t tell me...you’re a Korean drama fan?”

She tilted her head as a smile peeked over her lips. “Yes.”

“I do *not* look like Daniel Henney.”

“No, you look better.”

He settled his hands on the edge of the table as his face heated. Fuck, he was blushing. What the hell kind of escort blushed? His sisters had posters of Henney plastered all over their bedroom walls, had even established a man-beauty scale of one to Henney. They’d agreed amongst themselves that Michael was a solid eight. He didn’t give a damn where he ranked, but it meant something that this genius girl gave him an eleven.

Their dinner arrived, saving him from having to respond to her compliment. She’d ordered the salmon, so he’d done the same. No way was he going to eat lamb. He snorted to

himself. *Woolly*.

His fish was good, so he ate all of it. He suspected everything was good here. The Clement was one of Palo Alto's most exclusive hotels with rooms going for more than a thousand dollars a night. Apparently, econometricians made shit-loads of money.

As he watched Stella pick at her dinner, however, he noticed everything about her was understated. Her face was devoid of makeup, her nails short and unpainted, and her clothes were simple—though they fit her perfectly. They had to be custom made.

When she set her fork down and wiped her mouth, her salmon was only half finished. If they'd known each other better, he would have eaten it for her. His grandma always made him finish his dinner down to the last grain of rice.

“Is that all you're going to eat?”

“I'm nervous,” she admitted.

“You don't need to be.” He was a damned good escort, and he'd take care of her. Unlike most of his assignments, he even looked forward to it.

“I know. I can't help it. Could we just get this over with?”

His eyebrows twitched. He'd never heard someone say something like that in reference to a night with him. Changing her mindset was going to be fun.

“All right.” He draped his napkin over his empty dinner plate and got to his feet. “Let's go to your room.”