

## **Kostya Sneak Peek #3**

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### **Chapter Three**

Determined to keep Lobo a secret, Kostya slammed the door shut and spun around on Hector. The other man eyed him with suspicion and confusion. Kostya put a hand on Hector's chest and gave him a slight shove. "You need to go." He pointed toward the exit. "I work alone. Leave. Now."

Hector looked as if he wanted to argue but didn't. Maybe he was glad he hadn't seen anything inside the room. The man had enough secrets of his own to keep and didn't need another one. Backing away slowly, Hector said, "Good luck."

Kostya followed Hector to the rear exit and locked it behind him. He ducked into the office and opened the closet where Lana had hidden earlier. She had tucked herself away in the corner, her knees folded demurely and her feet curled up beneath her. The position couldn't have been comfortable, but she seemed almost serene and completely closed off in her own head. Her bony little legs looked so sad and pathetic. He'd have to make sure this girl was eating well now that she was under his care.

"Come with me."

She nodded and rose to her feet with effortless grace, her movements lithe and practiced. He didn't have to ask where she had learned to move like that. He'd been inside enough private sex clubs to know that some men liked their submissive women to learn certain positions for kneeling and sitting and even more rules for how to stand or bend. Even if he'd never seen the horrible bruises marking Lana's body, her quiet feminine grace and her rush to please would have been enough to make him suspicious.

Following close behind, Lana trailed him to the supply closet. He glanced back at her and frowned. "I hope you have a strong stomach."

Her pale eyes glinted with a flinty hardness. She hadn't lost that spark of strength he'd always admired in Russian women. Replying in their shared language, she lifted her chin and demanded, "Show me what needs to be done."

Kostya stepped aside and opened the door to reveal Lobo, her face battered and her hands slick with blood, hurriedly wiping up the pool of claret-colored fluid that had pooled next to the dead body of the man who had come through that same access tunnel he'd used. The only clues that mattered were the green handled screwdriver sticking out the back of the failed assassin's neck and the position of her weapon in the far corner.

Moving closer, Kostya spotted the scratches on her face. Shampoo and conditioner bottles had tumbled off the shelves while Lobo fought the man. In his mind's eye, he recreated the assault. The assassin had come through the wall into the darkness of the closet. Lobo had put herself between the cartel's man and Holly's sleeping body. Something had happened—a kick or a slap—that had knocked her gun away before she could fire. The assassin didn't have one of his own, it seemed, but there was a sharp, mean-looking knife next to his leg.

Whatever had happened, it was clear Lobo and the assassin had battled to the death. Her face was a fucking mess, and she moved slower than usual and favored her left side. He'd have to check those ribs when they got back to their headquarters.

Lobo finally looked up at him. She wiped her bloody nose with the back of her hand. "Sorry about your screwdriver."

The sound that escaped his throat came out as a strangled, rough laugh. "I don't give a shit about that screwdriver." Crouching down in front of his protégé, he cupped her face and forced her to meet his inquiring gaze. "Are you all right?"

She reached up with a trembling hand and jerked his gloved fingers off her face. "Not now," she all but ordered. "Don't be nice to me now."

He understood what she meant. She needed him to keep her in the mission mindset, to keep her running on those adrenaline fumes. Later, when she was alone, she could fall apart. And she would fall apart. A first kill? It was always the hardest.

Kostya rose to his full height. It was too much to ask of her, but he must. "Get this body wrapped, and clean this fucking mess up." He looked back at Lana. "Get in here and help her."

Leaving the two young women to work, he walked over to Holly and knelt down at her side. He checked her pulse and studied her face. She was still out cold. Glancing at his watch, he figured they had a two or three hour window to get everything cleaned up before she started to stir.

He moved away from Holly and plucked a pair of surgical booties from Lobo's backpack that he quickly slipped over his boots. "I'm going back to the office."

"Here." Lobo handed him a neatly packaged tarp and a roll of duct tape from her backpack.

He took the tarp and tape and headed for the office. With the practiced efficiency of a cleaner, he wrapped the body in the plastic and sealed it tight. When he was done, he returned to the supply closet for the wipes and disinfecting spray he preferred. The fluid degraded DNA but didn't leave any residue or scents.

Lobo and Lana had already dealt with their body and were quickly but thoroughly cleaning every surface in the room. Down on her hands and knees, Lobo was wiping along the baseboards while Lana cleaned every single bottle and box on the shelves. Not a speck of blood or a piece of hair could be left behind. It had to be damn near sterile when they left. Lobo had peeled out of her bloodstained coveralls and remained in the clean scrubs he had given her to wear. She had removed her bloody shoes and worked in only her socks with a pair of surgical booties over them.

They had a bag of trash that would have to be burned. He could see her shoes sticking out of the bag and her coveralls too. The missing towels from the clean stack that had been sprayed with blood would be noticed by Holly or Savannah but there was nothing else to be done about it.

Back in the office, he followed the same methodical routine. From the ceiling to the floor, he cleaned every surface before finely detailing the room. It was mindless work, the kind he had completed so often he could do it on reflex. He let his thoughts wander as he worked.

What would happen tomorrow? South of the border, the war would just be kicking off come sunrise. Hector had come here to take out the power players north of the border. Back home in Mexico, he had a bigger, messier and more dangerous war to win. It wouldn't be easy, and the cost would be high in lives, bribes and product.

Kostya doubted all that carnage would stay in Mexico. Everyone in the underworld would know that Nikolai had given his permission for Hector to turn the streets of Houston red with cartel blood. Knocking down the head of the biggest drug cartel? It wouldn't be popular among the other families in Houston.

Besian and his Albanian crews would fall in line because Nikolai had given them a heads-up and the offer of a little taste of that drug money. Nickel Jackson would have to be given a small piece of the action from Hector or else he'd find another supplier or make trouble with the Hermanos street gang tied in with the cartel. Mr. Lu and the Asian syndicate wouldn't like this new development at all, and any solution offered by them would be expensive. Mueller would be easier to push into line—for now. He was the new face in town and hadn't been able to find an ally for any power plays. Eventually he'd figure out the game. Kostya needed to make sure he had the intel Nikolai would need to stay five steps ahead of Mueller.

Finished with the office, he dragged the wrapped package out into the hall and left it next to the rear exit. He returned to the supply closet and found Lana sitting quietly next to Holly. Seeing them side by side, he was even more shocked at the resemblance. As much as the old man fucked around, he probably had children flung out from Sokol to Novorossiysk. *Maybe I should take her DNA for testing, too.*

"Where is Lobo?"

Lana pointed at the open access panel.

He crossed the supply room and knelt down in front of the panel. With a short whistle, he called for her. She didn't come immediately. When she did appear on the other side of the access panel, she had a wet shirt and a wrench in her hand. He realized she was clearing out that clogged drain. "Do you need help?"

She shook her head. "I'm done. It was just a washrag stuffed down near that bendy U-shaped part of the drain."

His lips twitched with amusement at the way she described the plumbing. "I see."

"Give me ten minutes. I'll get this cleaned up and then move the van around back."

He nodded and replaced the access panel. There was a lightweight shelf that usually sat in front of it so he dragged it into place. Turning back to Holly and Lana, he started removing the medical equipment they had placed on her. She was tolerating the

sedative well and would be metabolizing the last of it very quickly. He handed off the equipment to Lana who hurriedly packed it away in Lobo's bag.

"She offered me a job," Lana said, her voice carrying surprise. "She doesn't even know me, but she offered me a job."

Kostya's expression softened as he gazed down at Holly. "She's a good person."

He couldn't imagine what task Holly would assign Lana but he supposed having Lana here would be a good thing. She would be a full-time set of eyes on Holly. "You need a job. This is as good a place as any to work." Casting a sideways glance at Lana, he warned, "You'll have to work on your English. It's terrible."

Her hopeful expression deflated, and she shrank inside herself. "Yes, sir."

*Blyad.* Hating himself for being such an asshole, he was glad Holly hadn't heard him just now and that she couldn't understand Russian, even if she had. Her disappointment would be harder to bear than her anger.

With the most encouraging smile he could manage in such grim settings, he said, "Working here is a good way to practice. I'm sure you'll learn quickly."

Her bruised feelings didn't recover quickly, but what else could he expect after what she'd suffered since being trafficked? She was used to being told she was stupid and worthless and worse. Knowing he wasn't any different than the bastards who had hurt and used her didn't sit well with him, but somehow he couldn't make himself apologize for hurting her feelings. He'd been raised to sniff out weaknesses and prey on them, after all.

"Are we ready?" Lobo appeared in the doorway behind them. "I've got the van all the way up against the back doors."

*Shit.* He hadn't even heard her come back into the building or open the doors he'd locked. As if reading his mind, she waved the key she'd had made earlier that morning. She was getting good.

*Maybe too good,* he worried with a bit of paranoia. Someday the student would overtake the master...and then what?

"Watch Holly while we get the packages taken out to the van," he instructed Lana. "When we're done, you'll have to go with Lobo."

Putting on Lobo's backpack, Lana glanced back at the dead man and shrugged. "I'm not afraid of dead men." She turned her attention back to Holly. "Dead men can't hurt me."

Kostya ignored the little twinge in his chest at that remark and grabbed the heavy end of the tightly rolled package. Lobo lifted the feet, and they carted the first body out to the van. She hopped up into the van's cargo area and guided the corpse into the right spot before jumping out and following him to the second body. This one was heavier than first, but she didn't complain or make him carry more weight. It seemed the cardio and weight lifting regimens she followed were working.

When they were done, he peeled out of his coveralls and booties and tossed them in the trash bag. While Lana climbed into the back of the van, he pulled Lobo aside in the hallway. He settled a fatherly hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "You did so well tonight. I'm very proud of you."

Lobo stood a little straighter, but her eyes betrayed the shock starting to take hold of her. "It was harder than I thought it would be."

"I know. We practice and practice and practice so that we react on reflex when the shit hits the fan—but it doesn't make washing the blood off our hands any easier." He lightly chucked her chin, lifting her battered face and forcing eye contact. "If you wake up tomorrow afternoon and you decide this was too much, you just say the word, and I'll help you start over in a new place. It's all right if you discover this work isn't for you."

She shook her head slowly. "That's not what has me scared. I think—I mean—*God*." She closed her eyes and her expression turned dark with self-loathing. "I think I liked it too much. All of this—the planning, the sneaking in, the hiding, the drugging, the wet work. It felt *good*. It felt *right*."

His chest tightened painfully. All these years he'd been training her for this moment. He'd known it was coming. This was the inevitable outcome of turning her into his little shadow but it twisted him up inside. Was this how his parents felt when they had first recognized the spark of enjoyment in his eyes? Was this how his mentors and teachers had felt the first time he'd taken out a mark for the Centre? Proud but conflicted?

“You’ve experienced more in your sixteen years of life than most people will in a lifetime,” he said finally. “You had your whole family taken from you. You had your childhood ripped away. What you’re feeling now—the power and the control over life and death—it’s intoxicating,” added knowingly. “But it’s also dangerous. You can get drunk on this kind of power over other people. You can become addicted to the adrenaline. You can start to see all people as disposable bags of meat and bones instead of flesh and blood people with souls.”

She nodded at his warning. “I understand.”

Dropping his hand from her shoulder, he gestured to the double doors. “Take these two to the funeral home. *Krikun* will be waiting for you. Run them through the furnace yourself. He can be trusted, but it’s your ass on the line if it’s not done right. Wash the van and detail it before you drop it off. Fox will be following you all night. She’s going to kill any traffic cameras you pass and help you avoid any police checkpoints.”

“I know the drill, Big K. Stay off the toll roads. Stay away from banks and ATM machines. Use the back roads when possible and keep my head down.”

“Are you armed?”

She nodded. “And this time I won’t lose my weapon.”

“It happens to all of us at some point.” He didn’t want her berating or second-guessing herself. “Keep your eyes open. The city is going to be a dangerous place tonight.”

“I’ll get it done. I’ll take the trash to the incinerator at the clinic. Did you leave your gun in my backpack?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll make sure it’s cleaned and dumped on the black market before sunrise. I know someone looking to move some steel to Mexico.”

He frowned at her. “I’m sure you do.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve told you a dozen times. It’s not like that with him. He’s just a friend. And not the kind of ‘just a friend’ you are with Holly,” she needed.

She had him there. “Be careful with that boy. Someday he’ll want more than you can give him, and he’ll start to ask too many questions.”

“You mean like Holly does with you?”

Irritation flared within him. “Don’t be a smartass, Lobo.” He pointed at the door. “Go. Get this shit done.”

She mockingly saluted him and spun on her heel to leave the salon. If this was a taste of fatherhood, he wasn’t so sure he had the patience for the real thing. A stab of cold dread gutted him at the very idea of ever being a real father. Christ! He would be the absolute worst father known to man. What would he say at Show and Tell? Give tips on destroying DNA evidence?

After sending watching the van leave, he returned to the supply room and gently gathered Holly up in his arms. He carried her into the office and placed her in the chair. He made a quick trip to the supply closet to move the towels used for the pallet back onto the shelves and completed a final walk-through of the salon to make sure everything was just right.

“Time to sign off,” he instructed Fox via their comms. “We’re done here.”

“I sent Sunny packing an hour ago. I’ll keep eyes on our girls to make sure they get through the city without any harassment.” Her fingertips could be heard clacking against a keyboard. “The city really needs to work on the firewalls protecting these traffic cameras. I mean, any miscreant with a keyboard and a WiFi signal could hijack them for her own nefarious purposes...”

“Try not to get arrested,” he suggested dryly.

She snorted with laughter. “These wannabe white-hats working for HPD wish they could find a girl like me.”

“Goodnight, Fox.”

“Night, boss.”

Done with the job, he peeled off the fake moustache and stuck it in his pocket before wiping away the sticky residue clinging to his upper lip. He tugged the earbud free from his ear and slipped it into the back pocket of his jeans along with the fake ID embedded with a radio transceiver. From the other pocket, he withdrew a capped syringe, wrapped carefully for safekeeping, and the alcohol swab taped to it.

Kneeling down next to Holly’s chair, he considered her small body for a moment. She had the petite, thin frame of a gymnast or ballerina. The anti-sedative he wanted to use on her needed to be injected into a muscle with a bit of padding over it. He also needed to put it in a place she wouldn’t have an easy time seeing, just in case she

bruised. A little soreness along her hip or bottom wouldn't rouse suspicion. She could have easily bumped into something here at the salon and would think nothing of it.

Feeling like the worst pervert in the world, he shifted her in the chair and braced her body against his before tugging down the top of her pants and underwear to reveal a suitable injection site. He swabbed her skin and uncapped the syringe but hesitated a few seconds before stabbing the needle into her. He hated the thought of causing her pain and loathed himself for invading her privacy and touching her unconscious body. There was a word for men who did things like this, and it sickened him to think he had crossed that line all in the name of saving her.

After administering the drug, he guided Holly back into a sitting position and tucked the capped syringe back into his pocket. He backed away slowly to the doorway of the office and waited for her to wake fully. It wouldn't be long now. Ten minutes, maybe fifteen if her body was slow to react to the medication.

As he waited for Holly to rouse, he made a mental note to ask Zec to bring him another shipment of his preferred medications. The Albanian transporter had a global network that moved illicit contraband and legal goods. He was the only man Kostya trusted to get him the specific drugs he wanted from secret Russian stockpiles and not dangerous or ineffective counterfeits.

This specific drug he'd used on Holly he had also given to Lobo a few weeks earlier to help her understand the effects and how to use them to her advantage. Too little of the drug and a person would remember bits and pieces of what they'd witnessed or overheard while slipping in and out of a drowsy sleep-like state. Too much—and—well, it would be time to take a trip to the funeral home to use the furnace again.

Holly made a soft whimpering sound. Holding his breath, he watched from the shadows of the doorway as she came awake so slowly. When she started to stretch her arms high overhead, wiggling her fingers toward the ceiling, he backed away from the office until he stood at the rear doors of the salon. Reaching back, he opened and closed the doors with a loud *bang*. "Holly?" He called her name loudly. "Holly, are you here?"

"In my office," she called back in a sleepy, slightly confused voice.

He strode down the hallway to her office and stepped inside. Facing the doorway, she leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temples. Looking at him in complete bewilderment, she asked, "What are you doing here?"

“I was out with a friend. We drove by, and I noticed your car was still parked here. I asked him to drop me off. I was worried about you.” Not all of that was a lie. Not the most important part.

She inhaled a deep breath and glanced around her office. “I must have fallen asleep after Savvy left.” She yawned loudly and then made an embarrassed face. “Sorry! That wasn’t much of a cat nap, I guess. Not if I’m still this sleepy...”

“Let me drive you home. Whatever you’re working on can wait until tomorrow,” he gently ordered. With some of the sedative still circulating in her system, she was open to suggestion and easily manipulated. He wanted to walk a straight line here and reminded himself again and again to be very careful. “You need some sleep.”

Holly looked around her office and then nodded. “I think you’re right. I don’t feel safe driving.” She smiled up at him, her loopy expression betraying just how much of the drug still surged through her veins. “You’re the best neighbor ever.”

He returned her smile but inside he felt pure disgust with himself. The best neighbor ever? *Hardly*, he thought as he helped her close up the salon and get into the passenger seat of her sporty luxury coupe. He had actually been the one to suggest Alexei’s dealership earlier in the summer and had even helped her haggle down the price on the dream car she wanted.

“Tango Red with grey leather,” she’d said again and again. It was the only package she wanted, and she had been so proud of herself for scoring her dream car for such a good deal.

Of course, she had no idea that he’d paid for that discount the next time he’d played cards with Alexei...

“I’m pretty sure I locked the door after Savvy left,” she murmured drowsily from the passenger seat as they flew down the highway toward their West U neighborhood.

“You gave me a key,” he easily covered his mistake. “You were telling me about the security system problems last week and gave me an extra key when I offered to check in on it.”

“Oh? Right,” she replied uncertainly. Rubbing her forehead, she sighed. “I really have to stop working these long hours. My brain is turning to total mush.”

*You’re a fucking bastard. A real piece of shit.* He’d done some really terrible things in his life but slipping those drugs into Holly’s drink ranked right up there as the

worst of the worst. He wasn't used to the feeling of guilt eating away at him and didn't like it one bit.

"You just need some rest." He guided her car off the highway and down a side street.

"Maybe I need a vacation." She slowly rolled her head to stare at him. "Maybe we should go on a cruise."

"We? Me?" He glanced at her. "And you?"

"Sure. Why not?"

The image of Holly sunbathing in a tiny bikini on a cruise ship deck made his stomach leap wildly. He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "I'm not really a cruise kind of guy."

She rolled her eyes and scoffed. "You're not a cruise guy. You're not a dog guy. You're not a dates-your-neighbor guy. What kind of guy are you?"

He winced. She was loose-lipped because of the drug and seemed to have a bone to pick with him. "You're not a dates-your-neighbor guy." *Where the hell did that come from?*

"I told you why I haven't cashed in the gift certificate to the shelter. I travel too much, Holly. I'm not dog owner material right now." He couldn't tell her that dogs barked and were nosy and liked to dig things up that he might like to keep buried.

"So leave the dog with me when you're out of town," she offered helpfully. "We can be co-owners!"

The thought of owning a dog with Holly did something strange to his chest. He wasn't sure what that emotion burning him up was. *Hope?* "We'll talk it about tomorrow, okay?"

Grinning triumphantly, she poked his arm. "You big softie!"

"Holly." He shot her an irritated look, but she just mimicked his expression in an exaggerated way before bursting into laughter. "You're a mess," he remarked, unable to keep a straight face as she giggled next to him. *And it's all my fault...*

She leaned her head back against the seat and exhaled loudly. He pulled into the driveway of her house and pressed the garage door opener button clipped to the visor. While she drew lazy shapes on the window, he checked out the garage interior and then

used her house key to take a quick tour of the house, opening up closet doors and even checking the backyard. A third or fourth assassin was always a possibility.

He returned to the garage and opened her car door. “Come on,” he reached over to unlock her safety belt. “Let’s get you into bed.”

She yawned again and climbed out of the car with his help. He followed her into the house and coaxed her to eat something—a glass of lemonade and a banana—before walking her back to her bedroom. It was exactly the kind of space he’d always imagined for her. With the white metal bed frame and fluffy comforter, the dove gray room looked like something he’d see on the cover of *Country Living* while waiting in line at the supermarket.

She didn’t seem nearly as loopy as she entered her bathroom, but she was still a bit unstable on her feet. He leaned against the wall closest to her bedroom door and checked his cell phone for messages and updates from his spiders. When Holly exited the bathroom in a pair of long pajama bottoms and a loose tee, he watched her movements and tried to gauge whether she was safe to sleep alone or if he should drag a chair in here, just in case.

When she wobbled a bit, he crossed the space between them in four quick strides and slipped his arm around her waist. She sagged against him and dropped her forehead to his chest. “Sorry. I’m feeling a little dizzy.”

“I can see that.” Silently berating himself for not being more conservative with the sedative dose, Kostya carefully walked her to the bed and bent down to draw back the duvet and top sheet. He helped her into bed and then turned to switch on the lamp. “I’m going to leave this on in case you get up later.”

“Kostya?” She said his name in that soft, breathy voice that made his dick stand at attention. When she threaded her fingers around his and clasped his hand, his heart started to pound. “Will you stay with me?”

He gulped. “I’m going to crash on your couch.”

“No.” She gave his hand a tug before rolling onto her side facing the window, dragging his arm with her. “Stay here with me.”

“Holly, I don’t think—”

“I need you,” she cut him off with the three words guaranteed to keep him right there. She had him twisted around her little finger and wasn’t about to let go. Her voice muffled by a pillow, she implored, “Stay.”

“All right. I’ll stay.” He gently pulled his hand free and sat on the edge of her bed. He unzipped his boots and toed them off before reaching back to free his favorite—and very legally obtained—handgun from the waistband of his jeans. He placed it on the nightstand and then ran his fingers through his hair, scratching at his scalp and blowing out a noisy breath. Leaving his jeans on, he stripped out of his shirt and socks and slipped into bed with her. *This sure as fuck isn’t the way I’ve always imagined this happening...*

Careful not to touch her, he hugged the edge of the bed and kept four or five inches between them. He listened to her breathing and could tell she wasn’t asleep yet. What was she thinking? Was she remembering things she had heard tonight? Was she wondering why she had fallen asleep so quickly or trying to remember a conversation about that key and the security system that had never taken place?

Feeling like the lowest scum, he swallowed anxiously and wiped a hand down his face. Long undercover missions had never twisted him up like this, not even when he’d been ordered to seduce his marks or coax them into relationships to get his hands on sensitive information. But lying to Holly was slowly eating him up inside like a cancer. It was gnawing on his marrow and leaving him hollow and aching.

“Are you okay?” She whispered the question, almost as if afraid of the answer.

“I’m fine,” he lied. Turning his head so he could stare at her back, he asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m cold,” she admitted. Already burrowed deep under her comforter, she trembled. He was about to ask her if she wanted him to kick up the air conditioning a few degrees when she rolled over and searched his face with her questioning gaze. “Will you hold me?”

As if he could say no! He opened his arms to her and Holly squirmed into them, resting her head on his chest and curling an arm across his stomach. She let loose a contented sigh and then cuddled in closer. “You’re warm,” she said in a happy, sleepy voice. “And you smell really good!”

He bit back a laugh and brushed his fingers down the back of her head, reveling in the softness of her pale white hair. He was breaking the rules right now by holding her like this and touching her hair and caressing her back—but he didn't care. He didn't give a shit anymore.

*I killed for you tonight.* What would Holly say if he confessed his sins? Would she love him for what he'd done to protect her or would she run away in horror? What would she say when he told her that he'd asked another young woman to kill in her name?

Someday soon, the truth about the monster he was and all his lies would be forced into the open and Holly would revile him. She would curse the very sight of him and wish him dead.

So tonight? Tonight, he was going to hold the woman of his dreams, the woman he could never have, and he was going to enjoy every fucking second of it. He would breathe in her tantalizing scent and imprint it on his brain so he would never forget it. He would memorize the gentle curve of her spine and burn the heat of her right into his fingertips. *Mine*, he thought possessively. *Tonight, she's mine.*

"I don't care what Savvy says," she murmured unexpectedly. "You're a good man, Konstantin."

His heart stuttered in his chest. He couldn't even remember the last time someone had used his full name. Twenty years ago? Before he walked into FSB headquarters and pledged himself to the cause? The night his mother had kissed him goodbye before sending him away to spend time with friends in the German countryside in a dangerous bid to save his life?

As Holly drifted off to sleep, he closed his eyes and swept his fingers through her hair. A good man? No. Never.

But tonight? Tonight, he could pretend that he was all the things Holly deserved.