

Kissing lessons, studying for finals, an End-of-the-Year party, kissing lessons, strange conversations, and oh, did we mention kissing lessons? Find out how Skylar deals with it all.

SECRETS AND KISSES

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Secrets and Kisses

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CHAPTER ONE

Snatches of conversation floated around me as my friend and I sat under a tree at the bottom of a hill. It was a warm Friday afternoon for second period lunch at Valley View High that day, but no one seemed to mind. Final exams loomed ahead for every student the following week, yet there was no lingering sense of impending anxiety. Nobody seemed to care that their ticket out of here depended on how much they knew next week...but *I* cared and I *would* know. It was hard to study when the bane of my existence kept buzzing around my ears like a pesky fly. I'll get back to that later.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Skylar Knight. Kinda has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? I'm one of those few people who actually love the name they've been given. You see my mother had this fascination with that big expanse of color above our heads. Even my older sister and younger brother were unable to escape my mother's fanciful mood by being christened Raina and Grayson.

But hey, enough about me. I'm sure you're waiting with bated breath to hear about the bane of my existence, right? Generally, it's Blair "Miss-Rip-Out-Her-Bleached-Hair-And-Weave-A-Rug-With-It" Neuman. In particular, the constant parties she gives that leaves everyone talking days before and weeks after. Specifically, The Kissing Game.

For those of you untutored in the rules of this sordid game, I'll explain. The minute you step in the door, females are immediately quizzed about their man status (unless, of course, you walk in with someone of the opposite sex), get your picture taken I.P.S. (Instant Polaroid Style...you'd think they'd upgrade

to a digital camera, but I guess this way is easier), then have to wait until midnight to find out who you get to swap spit with, to tongue tumble with, to lip lock...well, you get the message, I'm sure. The catch is this: The Kissing Game takes place only at Blair's parties. Isn't *that* special?

"God, I can't wait till next Friday. I'm so excited I can barely breathe. A party for only us juniors. At Blair's house. God, Sky, I've always wanted to see her house..."

That's my best friend, Ellodie Arparo. She can be hyper at times, but not to the point where I feel like slapping her up one side and down the other. She's a veritable whirlwind of energy, like a hummingbird almost, but you'll never know from looking at her. Ellie has shoulder-length brown hair, vibrant brown eyes, and a keen fashion sense.

"...And the food! You know she's gonna have the good stuff. I wouldn't be surprised if her parent's cracks open a case of Beluga caviar. Have you ever had those little fish eggs before, Sky? Nasty, salty little things, I hear, but I'd be willing to try anything once. You know, I've about had it with these tests, Sky. Why can't we just choose recess for forty and hope we don't lose a turn?"

I laughed and shook my head. Did I forget to mention that she talks a lot and with great speed? But that's Ellie for you, and I wouldn't have her any other way. We kind of balance each other out. We've lived here in Phoenix, Arizona, all our lives, and we met in a sandbox, so it only seems appropriate that we stick together.

"...And guess who's going to be there?" Ellie said in a singsong tone.

She didn't have to tell me. I could see him perfectly. I know almost everything there is to know about Kedren Price. At six foot one, he sports short, brown hair, cut close on the

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sides and back, left long on top, has penetrating hazel-green eyes, and a little moustache that makes him look older than his seventeen years. He has chiseled cheekbones that any girl would die for and a mouth created especially for...smiling, of course.

And his voice! Lord have mercy on my soul, I can wax poetic about that boy's voice. It's kind of a mellow, soothing drawl with a hint of a Southern accent. He has a six-year-old daughter, Hayley, whom he adores to distraction. Psyche! Just wanted to see if you were paying attention. Actually, Hayley's his sister. His favorite color is forest green, he loves football, and he once had a major crush on Sarah Michelle Gellar. His three closest friends are Jayshon "J.D." DeAndrew, an African-American with a wide smile and shoulder-length braids; York Ramirez, a very good-looking Hispanic guy who's face reminds me of that singer, George Michael (minus the five o'clock shadow, of course); and Broderick "Brody" Shayne, a guy that could be Kenny G's twin brother, shoulder-length curly hair and all.

Kedren's popular, but not in the stereotypical sense. I mean, most popular guys are gorgeous and play football, or they're gorgeous and play baseball. But Kedren is just gorgeous. Period. In fact, he doesn't really have an athletic build. He's tall and lanky, but slightly muscular in the way that it looks good on him. Are you catching on? Needless to say, whatever he does keeps him in real fine shape.

If you're wondering where all this is going, I'll tell you. I'm sure you remember Ellie's rhapsodizing about Blair's party for juniors only, right? Well, Kedren's a junior, too (can I get an Amen?). He can probably kiss the rattle off a snake and I can kiss...well, that topic's not open for discussion right now. I

sighed wistfully, readjusted my sunglasses, and tried to concentrate on Spanish.

“You’re so transparent, Sky,” Ellie chided teasingly, ripping open a cream cheese packet.

“I am, huh?”

“Like cellophane, honey.”

“Yeah, well, only you notice so I’m not gonna worry about it,” I returned absently, turning a page.

“God, what am I going to wear?” she rambled on.

I sighed again in exasperation. Sometimes, Ellie reminded me of a dog with a bone.

“To what?” I feigned ignorance.

Ellie snorted and rolled her eyes. “To Blair’s party, you drone. What else would I be talking about?”

“What else, indeed,” I muttered under my breath. Aloud, I said, “Ellie, shouldn’t you be studying or something?”

“Study what? Algebra? I’m not about to go into my theory on *that*. Choir? I could break into a Whitney Houston favorite right now and land a record deal. Spanish? I know enough to get into a fight at Taco Heaven. That’s all the Spanish I need to know. Don’t sweat it, Skylar-babe. We’ll be in the Land of Oranges next fall. You’ll see,” Ellie assured me with confidence, then took a healthy bite of her bagel.

Once again, I found myself shaking my head in amazement. Why should I be worried? Ellie’s known for scraping by by the hairs of her chinny-chin-chin. She’ll do it again this time. She’d *better* do it this time; a dorm room with our names plastered all over it was waiting for us at the University of Florida. And as much as I was looking forward to going there, I didn’t want to attend all four years without Ellie occupying the next bed.

I glanced over at Kedren and wondered how close Oklahoma was to Florida. He was planning on going back home to go to college.

“Are you mentally stripping him or wondering why he’s even bothering to sit on that already overcrowded bench?” Ellie’s question brought my head around.

“Actually, he wears Jockey briefs. Green ones, I imagine,” I retorted dryly. I smiled in smug satisfaction as I watched Ellie’s eyes grow wide.

“How do you know about his underwear?” she demanded in shock.

I flashed a knowing grin. “A little bird told me.”

“A little bird, my sweet patootie. You probably staked out his house,” she accused.

“I did not,” I protested, affronted.

“I wouldn’t put it past you. You’re so obsessed with the guy, Sky, it’s getting really scary,” Ellie declared.

I rolled my eyes and put my book aside. I could tell I wasn’t going to get any studying done.

“This isn’t a fatal attraction thing, Ellie, and I’m appalled that you would use a word like ‘obsessed’ in the same sentence as my name. So I like the guy, so what? I date,” I pointed out, as if that explained everything. Just not lately.

“Only preppies,” Ellie said with disgust.

“Ellodie—” I warned her.

“You can do a lot better than Joel Goodman.”

“Joel was nice,” I argued in defense.

“So is a get-well card,” Ellie shot back.

I ignored that comment and went on. “We had a lot of things in common—”

“As do blood relatives,” came the smart comeback.

“—and we’re still good friends,” I finished in a firm tone.

“Like Mutt and Jeff,” Ellie drolled.

“You just don’t understand—”

“Oh, don’t I? We’ve known each other since our sandbox days, Sky. I understand you better than your own parents do. I know you think that Kedren would be the coolest guy to date,” she said.

I glanced over at Kedren again, trying to stall for time. I hate it when she gets this serious. Seriousness is my department.

“I think he’s a wonderful person and could probably get along with a skunk, but...”

“But what?” Ellie urged.

I shook my head and waved a hand. “But nothing. Let’s just forget about it.”

“No, let’s not. I admit ‘obsessed’ was kinda harsh, but that’s beside the point. Kedren Price isn’t a wonderful person, Sky, he’s a *great* person. He’s the epitome of The Guy. He doesn’t have an attitude problem, he probably helps old ladies across the street, and you can even take him home to Mom. He’s a saint reincarnate,” Ellie crowed, brown eyes shining.

“Look, Ellie, I’m not planning on marrying the guy,” I laughed. Although it wouldn’t be a bad idea.

“My point exactly,” Ellie poked a finger in the air. “Sky, Kedren is the perfect guy for you. He’s everything Joel isn’t. He’s gorgeous, for one, and he definitely won’t be pulled over by the Fashion Police. Joel is a moving violation waiting to happen.” Ellie crinkled her nose at the thought, and then continued. “You two have more in common than you think.”

“Name one,” I challenged her.

“Okay. You both have a younger sibling; Joel is an only child,” Ellie supplied with relish.

I opened my mouth, ready to oppose, but snapped it shut when I realized she was right.

“Okay. That’s one,” I conceded. “What else?”

“You both love to dance, you’re both good dancers, and you guys more or less like the same kind of music.” Ellie ticked off each point on her fingers, beaming smugly all the while. “Joel listens to classical music and wouldn’t know the meaning of rhythm if Janet Jackson gave him a lesson.”

She was right. About everything. I was so busy trying to glean what I could from the snippets I had heard, that I never even bothered to analyze our similarities. That was really out of character for me since I usually analyze everything to death.

“You dated Joel for what—six months?” Ellie was asking.

I nodded. She was kind enough not to mention that that had been two years ago. I know what you’re thinking. Why doesn’t this reasonably attractive, seventeen—year-old young lady have a steady boyfriend? Or better yet, why was her one and only serious relationship two years ago? Nothing is wrong with me, I swear. After Joel, I dated. Some. But either the guy lost interest or *I* lost interest. Then I got picky. And a job. You wouldn’t *believe* how many times I’ve used the “I have to work” excuse. And then Kedren Price reappeared. After that, it was all over but the cryin’.

“The only things you know about Joel are the things I mentioned earlier. You know what color, and maybe even the kind, of underwear Kedren wears. Doesn’t that tell you something?” Her eyebrows rose as both of her hands went out, palms up.

Staring at Kedren, I answered with an uncertain, “Yeah.”

Ellie threw up her hands and looked heavenward as if she were asking the Man Upstairs for help.

“Like I said before, you’re perfect for each other. Instead of sitting here like a turd in a punch bowl, you should be over there talking to him,” she commanded with gusto.

My mouth sagged open at the thought of talking to Kedren in that crowd. It would be like trying to hold a conversation at a heavy metal concert. Guys and girls, mostly girls, hovered around the table. One bold girl, the sleazy tramp, was trying to sit on Kedren’s lap, but he kept moving his legs.

“Sleazy tramp,” Ellie muttered my exact thought. “You’re much more beautiful than she is.”

“Oh, give me a break, Ellie—”

“You’ve had more breaks than the Berlin Wall, Sky. You don’t give yourself enough credit. I’m totally jealous of your hair.”

“Really?” I chewed my bottom lip and fingered a strand of wavy, reddish-brown hair. “Jealous? Of my hair?”

“Green with envy, I’m tellin’ you. It looks so healthy in that long, thick, flyaway style. Guys like long hair, you know,” Ellie went on.

“But it gets so unmanageable when it rains. I wouldn’t wish my hair on my worst enemy,” I chuckled.

“What about her?” Ellie pointed at a spot over my shoulder.

I turned around to find Sleazy Tramp still trying to place her big butt on Kedren’s lap.

“Okay, so maybe I’d give her my mane along with a few thousand tangles and drop-kick her to Russia,” I amended through clenched teeth.

Ellie burst out laughing. “I couldn’t have said it better myself. Anyway, I think your hazel-green eyes are your best feature—”

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"I always thought they were too close together," I murmured.

"—a perfectly rounded face—"

"With a slightly pointed chin, don't forget," I put in quickly.

"—flawless skin. A zit wouldn't dare show up on your peaches and cream face—"

"Which tends to burn, don't you know?"

"—and your lips aren't too Michelle Pfeiffer big or too Nicole Kidman small. They're just right," Ellie ended in a determined tone.

"But I think the bottom one's too full, don't you?" I tapped said lip.

"Arrrgh!" Ellie grabbed handfuls of her own healthy-looking tresses and tugged. "Will you listen to yourself, Sky? I give up. I completely...give up."

"Well, I'm sorry I don't see me the way you do, Ellie. No one in this world, in this lifetime, has perfect anything. No one. Not even Blair Neuman and especially not that airheaded twit trying to sit on Kedren's lap," I snapped angrily.

"You're only saying that because you think you aren't good enough for him." Ellie slammed a hand down on the ground in frustration.

"Well, everyone has flaws," I shrugged carelessly.

"We aren't talking about everyone, Sky, we're talking about you," Ellie countered, and then sighed heavily.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," I protested.

Ellie opened her mouth, and then closed it. She was ticked. I could tell. She was probably grinding her teeth and maybe even doing a mental count to ten. After taking a few deep breaths, Ellie started again in a calmer tone.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s really got you so freakish. Ever since I joined you for lunch, I could tell you’ve been irritated about something. Is Aunt Flow visiting this week?” she questioned.

One corner of my mouth curled in amusement at Ellie’s “nice” word for PMS.

“No. Aunt Flow won’t be visiting for another two weeks,” I told her.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“It’s...this party thing.” I looked away, suddenly embarrassed.

“What about it? You don’t think your parents will let you go?” Ellie tried to guess.

“Oh, they’ll let me go,” I assured her. I could feel the heat creeping up my neck. One of the disadvantages of having “peaches and cream” skin was that blushing was not a private matter.

“Well, I can’t think of anything else. Dancing, eating, drinking-but-being-sober, mingling with the rich and the downtrodden. I dunno, Sky, sounds pretty exciting to me,” Ellie drawled in teasing sarcasm.

“It’s more specific than that, Ellie.” I was stalling. Telling Ellie a secret had never been this difficult before.

“How specific is specific?” she asked, leaning in close.

“The Kissing Game,” I said, biting my bottom lip.

“The Kissing Game,” she repeated flatly. “Excuse me if I’m missing something, but what about it has you so rattled?”

I held my breath, then let it out slowly. Well, here goes nothing.

“I don’t know how to kiss.”

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