

A KIND OF VALENTINE

A KIND OF TRUTH SHORT STORY- FEATURING
RAND AND WILL

LANE HAYES

My phone buzzed as I exited the studio and stepped onto the sidewalk. I tugged at my scarf and shoved a hand in my pocket. It was fucking freezing outside. My grimace turned to a smile when I saw the caller ID.

“Hey. Whatcha doin’?”

“Waiting for you.”

“I like the sound of that. What are you wearing?”

“Rand, I’m going to come through the phone and wring your neck if you don’t get your ass home within ten minutes. This was your idea. Not mine.”

“Uh. Okay. I’m on my—”

“You don’t remember, do you? You’re unbelievable.”

I winced at Will’s beleaguered tone and decided it wouldn’t do me any good to admit I had no fucking idea what he was talking about. I was new to the business of being a boyfriend. A complete novice and at times... a complete fuck up.

“I remember,” I lied.

“Don’t lie. Just get here. She’s asking very direct questions about our sleeping habits. I’m uncomfortable and I don’t know

how much you want me to say.” Will’s voice was almost too low for me to hear above the din of Lower Manhattan traffic.

“Who?” Fuck this shit. I was clueless. Why pretend?

“The designer you hired,” he hissed menacingly.

Oh. Yeah.

“I’m leaving the studio now. Look... a taxi is pulling up to the curb. Someone is quickly exiting, looks like he’s in a hurry too, and I...” I leaned forward to give the driver my address before continuing my play by play commentary to Will. “...I’m in. I’ll be there in a flash, babe. I’m like Superman and Batman minus the cape or the cool ride. I’ll save you from—”

“Rand?”

“Yeah?”

“Cut the crap and get home.”

I frowned at my cell when he hung up on me then slipped it in my jacket and sighed. I was having a hard time getting things right lately. This wasn’t me. Normally, I didn’t care if I wasn’t on someone else’s timetable or if they got their feelings hurt by an offhand comment. Unless it was Will. My nerdy guitar teacher turned my world around a year ago and nothing was the same anymore. Including me.

Last January, I had nothing but a dream. I was the lead singer in an aspiring, kickass band with a loyal fan base in our native Baltimore and big dreams to make it something happen in New York City. We didn’t have an agent or a clue about how we planned to achieve our lofty goals. We also didn’t have a reliable guitarist. We hired one we thankfully fired a couple months later. I hated wasting time on Terry, but I’ll always be a little grateful for that asshole. If it weren’t for his dubious skills on a six string, I doubt I would have met Will. He stepped in and helped reshape our direction. A year later Spiral was on the map. We had a hit song on the radio and another one about to be released. And we had a few bucks in the bank.

The taxi driver grunted and pointed at the fare, effectively ripping me from my reverie. I pulled out a ten dollar bill, which was more than enough to cover the short trip from the studio to my Tribeca building. I jumped out of the cab and waved a greeting to the doorman before heading toward the elevator for the brief ride to the fifteenth floor. A woman's sharp voice echoed around the sparsely furnished condo. I set my guitar case against the entry wall and shrugged my coat and scarf off before moving toward my man and our guest.

"If your style is contemporary I can suggest some wonderful post-modern furniture with flashes of color. You said your boyfriend likes bold art and—"

"I do. Hi there," I interrupted, extending my hand to the young woman. "I'm Rand. Thanks for coming out today. I'm sorry I'm late. I got caught up at the studio."

I glanced at Will to make sure he knew the apology was really meant for him. He gave me a small sly smile that went inexplicably straight to my dick and suddenly, he was all I could see. I didn't get it. Sure, he was a good-looking guy. He was six foot two and lean. Basically my height and built. But he had an intense air about him he hid behind a pair of sexy glasses and an instrument. There was more to this man than his musical prowess.

I couldn't believe my luck... I woke up next to him every morning. The truth behind this wild attraction went further than his looks or talent. I was in love with the part of him I couldn't touch. The part of him that made me want to be everything he needed but didn't know he was looking for. The way he was for me.

"Hello. I'm Tara. We spoke briefly on the phone the other day. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'll only say this once and I promise to try not to gush, but I'm a huge fan of yours. I love Spiral! I was at your concert in Brooklyn last..."

I grinned widely as she sang my band's praises. I couldn't help it. I was a sucker for the accolades. I nodded and looked over her shoulder at Will, who rolled his eyes theatrically and pointed at his watch. Right.

"Thanks Tara. I appreciate that. So... we just bought this place from the owner last month. We've been here since June and decided we like the layout and we love the neighborhood, but we don't have time to deal with making it look more like a home than a college hangout, you know?"

"Of course! That's my job. Just give me your color palette, general design aesthetic and budget and I'll get you started."

Tara's mannerisms as she warmed to the topic of furniture placement and art suggestions were overly enthusiastic. I didn't think we were communicating though she was agreeing with everything I said. I wondered what I was missing when Will cleared his throat and slipped his arm around my waist.

"I'd like one of those bright blue egg chairs, a few modern rugs, an accent wall for our guitars... Rand can choose the color. And room for a baby grand piano when we can afford one. After that, I just want to know how you bill and what your time frame is. If we're all in agreement, we can get started soon. Right, hon?"

Hon. Ouch. It sounded like I was in trouble. I'd learned over the past year Will wasn't big on terms of endearment unless it was to make a point. I kissed his cheek in an effort to get back on even ground then glanced at our interior design candidate.

Tara was a pretty brunette with shoulder length hair. She was professionally dressed in dark trousers and high black boots paired with a soft looking red sweater. I had to guess her ensemble cost as much as my very best Fender Stratocaster. A lot. Her eyes softened slightly as she cast an indulgent look between us and I suddenly clued in that this interview was a two-way street. She was checking us out and trying to under-

stand our dynamic. Were the rumors true? Was the lead singer of *Spiral* really with a guy or was it all a publicity stunt?

“I’ll make note of your requests. And I assure you this will be as pain-free as possible.”

She turned to address Will with a raised eyebrow. “Would you prefer I contact you regarding material choices and furnishings or—”

“Yes,” I blurted. “Definitely. Will knows what we like. He’ll take care of everything.”

Tara gave us another sappy grin before launching into her plan to return with an assistant to take measurements and go through a rough budget. I went a little foggy when the details threatened to lull me to sleep. Thankfully Will seemed to be paying attention. He asked pointed questions and gave very succinct instructions regarding our general wants, needs and availability. I took a seat at the island and checked my messages while they finished up and idly wondered what Will was making tonight. I was starving.

Forty-five minutes later we politely shook hands and parted ways, but not before she extended a heartfelt promise to email her estimates the following morning.

“I’ll include basic furnishing, paint, art work. I’ll shoot for a Valentine’s Day weekend completion. It would be a perfect gift for you both!” she exclaimed with a wave before turning down the hallway toward the elevator.

Yeah, yeah. Whatever.

I closed the door and rolled my eyes. “God I thought she’d never leave! What’s for dinner, babe?”

I headed for the kitchen and grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl from the island. I unpeeled it seconds flat and chomped a huge bite before giving a few meal suggestions ranging from his amazing spaghetti to the vegetarian lasagna he made a couple weeks before.

“That was crazy good. Let’s have that. How long till it’s ready?” I asked as I opened the refrigerator.

I pulled out two beers and held one in his general direction without turning around. When he didn’t take it, I glanced over my shoulder. Hmm. Definitely still in the doghouse. Without a fucking clue. Not good on an empty stomach. I took another bite of my banana before popping the cap on the beer. I studied Will’s stiff posture and tried a smile.

“Aren’t you hungry? You’ve had a long day too. Weren’t you at class all day? That’s not good for you. A growing boy needs to eat,” I singsonged, raising my bottle in a toast before taking a swig.

Will walked around the island and leaned against the black granite countertop with his arms crossed. He was wearing a black V-neck sweater with khaki pants. An unexciting combo on most guys, but not Will. His tousled brown hair was a sexy contrast to the straitlaced student attire. And those glasses got me every time. I closed the distance between us and cradled his chin tenderly before pressing a small kiss on his lips.

“I love you. You’re beautiful,” I whispered.

Suddenly the clouds lifted and the sun came streaming into the room. Damn, he had an incredible smile. Will practically radiated sunlight and joy. He embodied everything good and worthwhile on this fucked up planet. And he made me want to be a better man. Someone worthy of him.

“I love you too.” He pulled me against him and slanted his mouth over mine. The kiss was sweet but too short. He pushed at my shoulder and gave me a sharp look. “But I’m mad at you.”

“I kinda figured.” I scratched my head and wrinkled my nose in confusion. “What did I do?”

Will sighed. “We’re equals here. We have to share responsibilities. I’m extremely proud of you and the band, but I’m not a groupie. I’m not your cook. I’m not your secretary. I’m not your

assistant and I'm not your fucking maid. If you leave your clothes on the floor in the bathroom one more time I'm—"

I shut him up with a scorching kiss then softened the connection to lick at his lips before plunging my tongue inside. He moaned and wrapped his arms around my neck. And fuck, he felt perfect. I moved my hand under his sweater and pulled to get his T-shirt out of the way, suddenly desperate for skin. When his fingers dived to my belt buckle I knew he was in the same state. He pulled back slightly and nibbled at my scruffy jaw while he worked on my zipper.

I wondered at the intensity of this desire sometimes. It seemed to grow stronger everyday. It wasn't just about sex. It was a physical need to be near each other. To talk, to laugh, to play music and sometimes... simply breathe the same air. I'd been on a steady free fall since we met, but knowing we were together in this had changed everything. We were committed to making every facet of our relationship work. Unfortunately I was usually the one a step behind. But I was determined not to fuck up the best thing that ever happened to me.

"Mmm. Bedroom," he groaned as he slipped his fingers under the elastic of my briefs.

"Wait. Should we talk about stuff?"

"Stuff?" Will squeezed my ass and pushed my jeans out of the way and reached for my heavy cock. "You really want to talk now?"

My breath caught when he held me in a firm grip and began a slow stroking motion with a wicked twist of his hand.

"No," I grunted, pulling at his belt. "I—I want to be inside you, baby, but—"

"Come with me now. We'll talk later."

I yanked his sweater over his head as he moved down the short hallway toward our bedroom. His T-shirt hiked up his back, giving me an innocent glimpse of skin that made me weak

in the knees. I hurried after him, thinking it was better to pass out from lust in bed rather than at the kitchen sink. I shed my clothing as I raced into the room. Only to stop in shock at the doorway.

Will stood next to the bed busily removing his shoes and socks while pretending not to notice my gobsmacked expression.

“What’s all that?” I swallowed hard and pointed to the three items lined up like prizes in an arcade on our white duvet. The pristine background served as spectacular enhancement for the extraordinary display.

“Your anniversary present,” he said in a low sexy tone. He chuckled at my dismayed expression as he sat down on the edge of the mattress naked. “A year ago today was our first lesson. The first day we met. It was our beginning. We have to commemorate it.”

I opened my mouth then closed it when I couldn’t think of a single thing to say. There was lump in my throat the size of a grapefruit. I was slightly nervous I might choke or even fucking cry. I didn’t get it. This guy never ceased to amaze me. He knocked me off my feet with sentimental dates I’d never in a million years remember, like our first guitar lesson, then paired it with the unexpected. I glanced down at the naughty offerings on the bed and picked up the one closest to me.

“So you want to celebrate with handcuffs and—is that a dildo? Fuck, that’s kinda big,” I commented, bending to remove my boots and shuck my jeans off.

“I’ll be gentle.”

I threw back my head and laughed. Then I jumped over him and quickly fell on top of him. I held on tightly when he tried to wriggle away. I tickled his sides and rained kisses over his face, knocking his glasses askew on his sweet freckled nose. When he let out a screech I stopped. I wasn’t entirely surprised he used

the diversion to change position and scramble over me, pulling my arms beside my head. His stern expression was ruined by his obvious excitement. His cock was rock hard and leaking precum on my stomach.

“This isn’t gentle,” I admonished.

“You don’t deserve gentle. You’re a pest.”

“What are you going to do to me? Tie me up?”

“I haven’t decided. There are so many choices. I could handcuff you to the bed blindfolded and use the dildo to—”

“Or I could do that to you,” I suggested with a mischievous grin.

Will cocked his head thoughtfully and nodded. “True. You could—hey!”

I pushed him off me then rolled over to cover him completely. I bit, licked, kissed and sucked at his neck, jaw, chin and lips until he was writhing helplessly beneath me, begging for more. I shifted my weight so I straddled his thighs, locking him in place. Then I reached for my anniversary gifts and made a show of examining each one carefully.

“Is there a key or am I going to have to call a locksmith later to free you?”

“Rand...”

“I like the blindfold. Looks like I’ll have to use the handcuffs first. Or are you going to cooperate?”

“No. You’re the one who’s supposed to be flat on his back,” he scowled. “Fix my glasses. They’re bugging me.”

“Bossy. Okay. It looks like this hand goes here—” I clicked the leather cuff around one of his wrists and reached for the other. “—and this goes here. Got you just where I want you. The problem is we don’t have a fucking headboard yet. I’m going to have to trust you to cooperate.”

“What if I don’t?”

I gave him an evil grin as I removed his glasses and slipped

the black velvet blindfold over his eyes. “You will. Legs up. I’m gonna need a ton of lube to get this bad boy inside you.”

“Are you talking about the dildo or your dick?”

“My dick, of course.” I pushed his knees to his chest and splayed them wide before leaning over to grab the lube on the nightstand.

A shiver of lust rippled through my body. Will was so damn lovely. From the subtle arch of his back to the proud tilt of his stubbled chin. I loved the way he opened himself to me. He never backed down and he never shut himself away. Not anymore. We were equals in this, just as he’d said earlier. It didn’t matter whose hands were bound. We were together. I loved that he made me want to meet him half way every fucking time. In bed and out of bed.

“Spread your legs, baby. That’s it. Keep your hands above your head.”

I crawled between his thighs and set a slick finger over his hole. I massaged the sensitive skin but didn’t push. I wanted him to make him crazy with need. I bent over him and licked the tip of his cock. It was a feathery touch in perfect harmony with the light caress below. I knew I couldn’t keep going for long. My hand was shaky and the desire to taste him and suck him overrode my best intentions to prolong the torture.

I swallowed him whole and finally pushed my finger inside. He chanted my name like a song somewhere above me, moving his hips in an erotic rhythm as he pulled his legs open wider still in blatant invitation for much more. I sucked furiously and added a second digit before reaching down to give my neglected dick some attention with my free hand.

“Rand, stop! I don’t want to come. Fuck me.” Will snaked his tied hands over my head and pulled my hair. I let go of his rigid member with a popping sound and sat up quickly to get more

lube. I slathered it over my cock and lined myself at his hole then stopped.

“We forgot something.”

He let out a growl and launched into a needless reminder that we hadn’t used condoms in months. I let him yammer away knowing he’d catch on. The second the wide head of the dildo breached his entrance he went completely still. And quiet. I drizzled more lube along the shaft and pushed it a little farther, keeping close watch on his expression. Pain gave way to an even state of acceptance.

“It—it kind of hurts.”

“It’s stretching you, baby. See if you can take it a little longer.”

“I can’t. I want you. I don’t want—”

“Shh. You’ve got me. I’m right here. You can’t see me but I’m here and I’m not going anywhere.”

I repeated the words like a chant until I felt him begin to relax. When he raised his hips and tugged at my hair, I pulled the dildo away and quickly took its place. I plunged inside him, bottoming out in one stroke that had us both crying out in pleasure. Will folded his legs around me and dug his heels into my ass.

“God, you feel so good. I want to ride you hard, baby. I want—”

“Then do it. Fuck me hard.”

My vision blurred. I fought to clear the sensual haze and refocus but it wasn’t easy. He was demanding and more verbal than usual. I held his shackled hands above his head and drove inside him relentlessly until we were bathed in sweat. The room echoed with the sound of primal grunting and feral pleas for more.

Will was insatiable. My arms shook with the effort to stay upright. When I couldn’t sustain my own weight, I collapsed on

top of him, pulling him into a tight embrace as I pistoned my hips wildly and rode the final wave of pleasure. I could feel my release chasing me and knew without a doubt it was going to send me flying.

The fall was glorious. Like soaring through the air high above the earth. But the best part was sharing it with him. He came with shattering cry, bucking his hips upward and pouring himself between us a moment later.

Our heavy breathing sounded in the darkened room. The only illumination was from the light in the hallway. It wasn't enough to see him clearly. I was greedy for details now. I wanted to know how he felt, what he was thinking and a host of other things that scared me. I kissed his damp forehead and sat up gingerly to turn on the bedside lamp. Much better.

"Help me get these off." Will waved his bound hands over his head and nudged my ass with his foot.

"Hmm."

"What does that noise mean? C'mon. My wrists are numb and—"

I whisked the blindfold from his eyes and leaned over to trace the corner of his mouth with my tongue. He looped his hands over my shoulders and sighed into the kiss. I loved the whimpering noise he made when I pulled back.

"Next time let's get a gag too," I teased as I reached for his wrists. "Shoot. I can't get these off."

"You're hysterical. Click the button on the side."

"I tried that. It's not working. Guess you're stuck. No need to panic. We can make this fun—"

"Rand. Cool it. I have to use the bathroom."

"Fine. Have it your way." I removed the handcuffs. "Want my help? After all, it's my jizz leaking from—"

"You are disgusting!" He smacked my arm and glared at me before hopping out of bed.

I busted up laughing at his theatric exit. It was hard to look serious when you were butt ass naked. When he returned a few minutes later and picked up his discarded briefs, I stopped him, patting the space beside me.

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“Famished. But I want to talk to you for a second. Don’t run away.”

Will gave a short laugh but complied. I pulled him into my arms, tangling our legs in my quest to touch as much of him as possible at once. He smiled shyly and diverted his gaze to my inked bicep. He traced the circular Celtic symbol with care then snuggled closer and looked me in the eye.

“I don’t run away.”

“I know. It was a figure of speech. You’re brave and beautiful. And... kind of kinky. I like it.” I chuckled when he tried to hide his face in my shoulder. “I have a question. How did you remember the date of our first lesson? I know it was winter but—”

“I remember everything important. You’re the most important person in my life. The day I met you will always be special to me.”

I gulped. The grapefruit was back. I could hardly speak. I cleared my throat and tried.

“Me too, baby. I’m sorry about today. I’m sorry I didn’t remember—”

“I didn’t expect you to remember the date of our first lesson. That’s not why I was mad. I was mad you were late to an appointment you made.”

“I know. Look... I’ve never been a boyfriend before. Not in any real sense. And this feels bigger than “boyfriends” ’cause you’re it for me, Will. You’re my partner, my lover, my best friend, my reason to get up in the morning. You’re the only one.

Always.” I brushed a tear from his cheek and kissed him tenderly. “I’m gonna make it up to you.”

“Thank you, but—”

“Shh! No more talking. I’m fucking starving and if there’s no lasagna in the oven, we’re ordering take-out. I’m in the mood for Italian.” I sat up and reached for my jeans.

“Try again.”

“Uh... I think *you’re* in the mood for Italian.”

Will guffawed and shook his head. “Better but not quite.”

“What would you like to eat? How does Italian sound?”

“Amazing!” He kneeled on the bed and threw his arms around my waist. “Order anything. I’m hungry too.”

VALENTINE’S DAY WAS A MYSTERY. One I’d managed to avoid for twenty-six years without fail. I’d hoped the designer would pull through and I could claim redoing our condo was a part of Will’s present, but the project was delayed. The furniture was back-ordered and the painter was stuck on another job. Hearts and flowers weren’t going to cut it, unless I figured out a way to make them special. When nothing registered, I called Will’s best friend, Benny. He’d know what to do.

“Candlelight dinner at midnight with Billie Holliday playing softly in the background. And rose petals!”

“Rose petals?” I rolled my eyes and leaned against the hostess podium at Johnny’s, a family owned Italian restaurant in Greenwich. Benny’s great-grandfather had opened it over a century ago. It was a popular destination and even on a Saturday at three in the afternoon every table was occupied.

“Yes! Red rose petals everywhere! Start at the front door and let them trail through the living room to the—”

“Yeah, I don’t know, Ben. What about if we just go out to

dinner? Can we come here?"

Benny laughed out loud. His blue-tinged bangs fell into his eyes as he howled with glee.

"Oh, that's cute!" He sobered comically and raised an eyebrow. "No. First of all, Valentine's Day is tomorrow. Any place you can get a reservation with that kind of short notice isn't someplace you want to go. Johnny's is booked solid. I'd try to squeeze you in but trust me, you're better off making dinner at home and avoiding the crowds. Nothing is less romantic than spending a special day with a hundred desperados trying to make points with their significant others." He sighed longingly and made a face. "Not that I'd know. I can't remember the last time I spent a romantic evening with a hot guy, never mind Valentine's Day."

"So you're as clueless as me, eh?" I grinned and tousled his hair, chuckling when he pushed me away.

He shrugged good-naturedly. "I am. Good luck, Rand. I'm sure you'll think of something."

EVERYTHING I THOUGHT of turned into a disaster. Literally. The smoke alarm went off in the kitchen when I burned the chicken dish Cory's girlfriend insisted was a no-brainer. The heart-shaped box of chocolate hearts melted because I left them sitting too close to the oven. The roses looked okay I supposed. I wasn't going to rip the petals off though. At the rate I was going I'd singe them and be left with blackened flowers. Pathetic. I took one last look around the kitchen in defeat. There had to be a way to fix this mess before Will got home. I had two hours and still no clue.

"Hi, I'm home. I— fuck, you scared me!" Will backed up a step when I bounded from behind the foyer wall like a Labrador

puppy. He adjusted his glasses and gave me funny smile. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing suspicious. Just wanted to wish you a Happy Valentine’s Day.” I pulled him into my arms and squeezed him hard.

“Can’t breathe.”

I loosened my hold and looped my arm around his shoulder, purposely putting myself between him and the kitchen. He wasn’t going to be happy about that, I mused as I led him toward our bedroom.

“Come with me.”

“I’m pretty sure you said Happy Valentine’s Day in the shower this morning,” he said with a laugh.

“True, but once isn’t enough and— there’s more.”

“More?”

“It’s not much but... you’ll see. Wait. Close your eyes and give me a full sixty seconds before you come in.”

Will gave me a bemused grin and nodded. “Okay.”

“No peeking.”

“I won’t move a muscle. Promise.”

I walked backward and slipped inside the room. I finished up my preparations and picked up the acoustic guitar lying on the bed next. I strummed a couple chords then opened the door.

“I’m ready. Are you?”

“Yes.” He moved passed me but stopped almost immediately. “What is all this?”

“Well...it’s—a picnic in bed with candlelight and music and... Um. I didn’t know what to do to make today special. I’ve never done the Valentine thing in my life. When I think about Valentine’s Day, I think of childhood memories like the Charlie Brown special and those stupid little cards you have to give out in grade school. You know, the ones where you choose the best ones for your friends and the lame ones for the kids you can’t stand.”

“Okay but—”

“Then you grow up and it’s hearts and roses and maybe dinner and... I didn’t know where to start so I did it all. And it wasn’t pretty. I made dinner and burned it. So I bought take-out pizza from Johnny’s with Benny’s help. I bought chocolate too but it melted so I made fondue or something like it. The roses are fine. I managed not to kill them—” I pointed to the vase of long stem roses on the bedside table next to a ton of lit candles. “—which is good. So we’re having pizza in bed by candlelight and I’m going to sing you a sappy song and—”

“Rand, I’m—I don’t know what to say.”

“Hey, it’s not much and you’re gonna fuckin’ freak when you see what I did to the kitchen but—” I paused when he burst into laughter. “—I want you to know I love you. If we were kids I’d pick the best Valentine to give to you. If we were rich, I’d buy you that baby grand piano you want. If we were old, I’d put our rocking chairs next to each other so we could hold hands while we watch the sunset. But right now, I just have me. I don’t know how to be a good boyfriend or partner, but I’m trying and I—”

“You’re perfect. This is perfect.”

“It’s not, but—”

Will pulled at my strap, wordlessly asking me to move my guitar out of the way. He stepped close and cupped my face between his hands. His expression was intense. I was mesmerized by his barely contained emotion. Usually when he got this way, it was behind an instrument... or when we made love. I’d learned to pay close attention.

“This is all I need. This moment. You. I’m going to want the same thing on February 15th too. It isn’t the day. It isn’t the dinner, the flowers, candles or music... it you. It’s us.” He wrapped his arms around my waist and laid his head on my shoulder. “Just us.”

I ran my fingers through his hair and kissed his forehead. He was right. “Yes. Just us. I love you, baby.”

“I love you too.” He gave me one of his beautiful smiles then threaded his fingers through mine and led me toward the picnic I’d set up in the middle of our bed. “Thank you. Pizza and chocolate...my favorites. But Rand...”

“Yeah?”

“You’re still cleaning the kitchen.”