



## *All I Want Is You* Preview

It was less than half an hour before Jared was scheduled to arrive. And lord, what if he was five or ten minutes early? The truth was, she didn't even really like the idea of Jared seeing where she lived, but he'd insisted on picking her up – so she simply *couldn't* have him showing up to find her locked out of her own house, looking bedraggled from a rough day at work and clearly having no control over her life. On top of everything else, she'd worn her new shoes home and her toes were already pinched in agony.

She needed a plan. She needed to think outside the box. She couldn't blow this opportunity. Because sure, maybe he would understand – but he might also get a bad impression of her, and she simply couldn't let that happen. Too much was riding on this.

*I have to get in this house. I have to. In fact, I'm going to. No matter what it takes.*

Beginning to look around for ideas, she spotted the house directly across the street, two doors up from the Harringtons. She'd never talked to the guy who'd moved in just a few months ago, but she'd seen him plenty of times in passing, and he'd looked kind of rugged, at least from a

distance, which probably also meant he was strong. She'd seen him carrying around toolboxes and two-by-fours, too. And maybe the idea that had just popped into her head would sound crazy, but she just didn't have time to worry about that right now. Precious seconds were ticking away.

Without giving it another thought, she marched across the street on her aching feet, climbed the few steps to his wide, awning-covered front porch, and rang the bell. *Please be home, please be home.*

A few seconds later, the door opened – and a surprisingly handsome guy stood on the other side. Having never seen him close up, the sight of him actually stole her breath. He looked a little scruffy in a zip up hoodie over a t-shirt and slightly paint-spattered jeans, but his thick, dark hair and piercing blue eyes made up for it.

"Hi," he said uncertainly when she managed to say nothing at all.

"I'm your neighbor," she blurted awkwardly then, pointing across the street.

"Oh. Yeah. Think I've seen you before."

She nodded. Still struggled to breathe. And wished he weren't so good-looking. It was a very inconvenient distraction. "I need a favor," she said, still not quite able to speak in any clear way.

"Um, okay," he replied. But he still sounded a little wary – understandably.

"I'm locked out of my house," she explained, "and I need you to kick down the door."

He just looked at her like he couldn't have possibly heard her correctly – which was, again, perfectly understandable. But it still made her feel a little crazy. Or like she *appeared* to be crazy anyway. Maybe both. Finally he said, "You want me to kick down your door? Is that what you said?"

She pursed her lips, sighed. She had so little time. And he was almost unbearably attractive in his unshaven, needs-a-haircut way. "I realize that probably sounds nutty," she offered.

"Yeah, it kinda does," he replied.

Crap. She took a breath, tried again. "And I wish I had time to explain – but I don't. Will you do it?"

He lowered his chin, hesitating. "Sorry, but you're gonna have to give me a little more to go on. Some kind of reason. I can't just go kicking down a door without one."

Okay, she supposed she could get that. But she didn't have time to mince words. "I'm late. And I have a date, a very important date."

"So I've got Alice in Wonderland at my door," he muttered beneath his breath.

She sighed once more, fully embarrassed now. He thought she was some kind of whack job. And for some reason, despite everything, she felt the need to correct him. "It was actually the White Rabbit who was late for the very important date."

"Whatever," he said. "Go on."

"Well, my landlord accidentally locked me out today when he came to do repairs. There's a second lock on the door, you see. Well, more than one actually. And I don't have a key for it, but apparently the landlord does." As she babbled on, it struck her how much her life did sound just as non-sensical as Alice in Wonderland.

"And he can't just come give you a key?"

"His wife can't reach him. And the locksmith can't come for hours. And it's —" she dropped her gaze to her watch "— oh God, only a little more than twenty minutes until my date."

She watched impatiently as her scruffy, handsome neighbor shifted his weight from one work boot to the other. "What's so important about this date?"

This time her sigh came out exasperated. How much did he need to know already? He was starting to seem pretty nosy. "Look, I know it sounds weird, but I don't have time to explain. So will you help me or not?"

Meeting his eyes again, she found it hard to keep their gazes connected — because he was just too handsome and something intense shone in his stare. But she persevered, because this was all so vital and even seemed to grow more imperative with each passing moment.

He stood there hesitating — for an agonizingly long moment — before finally saying, "All right, Alice, sure — I'll kick down your door."

Relief rushed through her as she said, "Thank you! Thank you so, so much!" Though as she spoke, she spontaneously reached out to grab his hand — and then a tingle ran up her arm as she realized what she'd done and that they were both suddenly frozen in place by the touch, so she dropped

it just as quickly. "Come on, let's go." She turned to head down the steps, thankful to no longer be peering into those eyes of his and just hoping he followed her.

"Gonna tell me about this date of yours?" he asked from behind as they crossed the narrow street, stepping between two parked cars.

"Why are you so interested?" she asked without looking at him.

"Just not sure what makes any date important enough to kick down a door, that's all."

"Maybe I'm just ... tired of letting circumstances beyond my control rule my life," she said. *But God, that was a little personal. Spill your guts to the guy, why don't you.* She decided to keep talking before he had time to analyze that too much. "Or maybe I just value keeping my commitments. There's nothing wrong with thinking *any* date is important."

As they reached the opposite curb, he said, "You realize it's probably gonna damage the door or the frame, right? Maybe both?"

"I don't care," she told him, recognizing that her gut-spilling comment *was* part of what drove her. She was sick of fate dealing her a crappy hand. She was tired of feeling out of control. She was taking control *back*. "Though if I seem a little crazy, I'm really not."

As they climbed the steps to her porch, he glanced over at her. "You do. Just a little." Though the twinkle in his eye made her think he was kidding. Or she hoped so anyway.

As they approached the door, Christy's heartbeat sped up. It had already been working overtime, ever since she'd left work, but now her adrenaline was in serious overdrive. It was fifteen minutes 'til Jared was due. And she had just asked someone to kick down her door. Yet she also couldn't see any other way at the moment but to press forward.

She watched as her neighbor pushed and leaned against the door, testing its strength against his own.

"Think you can do it?" she asked softly, the gravity of the decision settling around her.

"Yep," he said. "Probably." He stood back then, studying the door as if it were an adversary, clearly planning his attack. Then he shifted that penetrating blue gaze to hers. "You're sure you want me to do this, right? You really want me to kick it down."

"Yes." No hesitation. "And hurry. I'm so late."

“For your very important date,” he replied.

“Yes,” she said again. Though this time the word came out more quietly and she sounded annoyingly sheepish to herself.

Silence blanketed the porch for a few long seconds in which she could feel them both weighing the craziness of this, and it didn’t help that they were complete strangers. Until finally he said, “Okay, here goes.”

And with that, he lifted one leg, bending his knee, and punched his work boot toward the door, landing a hard blow just above the knob. The harsh sound of cracking wood split the spring air and a slow motion second later, the old door fell neatly inward, having come completely unhinged – as well as broken at the lock – landing flat in the little hall that led to the stairs. He’d done it as neatly and efficiently as any TV cop.

They both stayed quiet, kind of amazed, then looked at each other.

“I did it,” he said, as if surprised that he really had.

“You did. Thank you!”

“That’s what you wanted, right? You really wanted me to kick down the door.”

She understood his confusion over it, even now. “Yes.” Though for the first time, she began to wonder ... “How am I gonna leave now, though? How am I gonna lock the door when I go?” Oh no – how had she not considered that part?

“That’s a pretty good question, Alice,” he said. “One I wish you’d thought of a minute ago.”

But she merely released a sigh, determined to stay positive about this. “It’s okay. It’ll be fine. I’ll figure something out.” She stopped then, blinked, bunched up her lips. “Unless ... unless *you* can figure something out. While I’m getting ready. You seem like the kind of guy who ... fixes stuff.”

Just then, the door next to hers opened and old Mrs. Hart stepped out. “Lordy bee, what was that racket?” Then her eyes squared on the empty doorway where Christy’s door used to stand. “What in heaven’s name happened?”

“I ... was locked out,” she explained.

“So I kicked her door in,” her scruffy neighbor said.

She flashed him a look. Maybe it would have become obvious anyway, but she didn't really need him advertising it.

"Well, that was an extreme thing to do," Mrs. Hart said critically, sounding all too sensible at the moment.

"You broke down the door? You couldn't wait 'til I got here? You broke it down? You're gonna have to pay for that, you know."

They all turned to see a heavyset man Christy had never met before, and she said, "You must be my landlord."

"I can't believe you broke down the door!" he said in reply. And she realized he was looking at her like she was crazy – which was beginning to seem like a trend – and that maybe he had every right to. But he just didn't know all she'd been through, and all that was at stake here.

That was when her handsome neighbor threw up his hands to declare his blamelessness. "She asked me to. I'm just an innocent bystander here."

Her only defense was to say, "Your wife couldn't reach you. And the locksmith couldn't come. And I had to get in. It's important." She checked her watch again. Ugh. Ten 'til seven. Jared could be here any moment.

"What the hell was so important that you broke down the door?" the still-clearly-astonished landlord asked.

"She has a date," her neighbor replied for her.

"A date," the landlord repeated.

God, this was a nightmare. Like the rest of her life. "I – I'll pay for the door," she said. "Not that I know how," she added under her breath. "Or ... I'll figure out a way to fix it."

Her words hung quietly in the air for a moment before her neighbor quietly suggested, "I can probably fix it," and she and the landlord and Mrs. Hart all looked at him.

"You can?" Christy asked in a softer tone than she'd intended.

"I'll see what I can do," he offered. "Just let me go grab my toolbox."

“I – I – really have to go get ready,” she said to the porch’s inhabitants at large. “I promise I’ll deal with the fallout of this, but I can’t right now. It’s important,” she claimed again.

“An important date,” the landlord said dryly.

“Yes,” she whispered, then vacated the porch and literally ran up the stairs, as much to escape the ridiculous situation she’d created as to get ready for her “very important date.”

And a part of her knew she should probably just throw in the towel at this point and accept that she couldn’t go out tonight, important or not – yet that desperate, determined part of her remained committed to saving the evening somehow. *This can all be okay. I can save it. I can make it worth all the madness.*

Bounding into her bedroom, she began stripping down, tossing the day’s work clothes wherever they fell. She rifled through her small, tightly-packed closet for the skirt she’d planned to wear. Yanking it from a hanger, she hurried into it. Then scoured the closet again – this time in search of the cute top she’d planned to put with it. Crap. Where was it?

From downstairs, noises. The mutterings of the landlord to Mrs. Hart. Then Mrs. Hart’s reply. “All I know is I heard a loud bang, came out, and found it this way. That’s when the fella across the street said he’d kicked it down.” *Yes, great, let’s keep repeating the really crazy-sounding part.*

Feeling downright frantic, she began yanking out handfuls of hangers, inspecting what hung on them, then throwing them on the bed. *Where’s that top?* She’d gotten it on clearance at work and she’d thought it was perfect for a romantic first date.

All was quiet downstairs now, so hopefully that meant the landlord was gone. With any luck, Mrs. Hart had gone back inside, too. Then the plunk of metal against wood told her the neighbor had just lowered his toolbox to the porch. *Where on earth can that top be?*

*And how am I going to explain this door situation to my date?*

That’s when she stopped, took a deep breath. *Maybe he’ll be late.* Not a great attribute, but right now, she’d find it totally forgivable. She resumed looking for the feminine top.

And then, from outside, amid the general muffled noise of the city, she heard the neat, clean slam of a car door and, despite that it could be anyone, she somehow knew ... Jared wasn’t late. Crap. *Okay, find something else to wear. And hurry.*

Surveying the pile of clothes now strewn across her bed, she grabbed up the first dressy-enough top she saw – actually a short-sleeved sweater. Then she caught sight of herself in the mirror. *Oh*

*Lord, I'm a disaster!* Her hair was messy and her face far too shiny! Dropping the sweater, she reached for a tissue to blot her skin, and as for her hair – she reached for a hairbrush, but this seemed more like a curling iron situation.

“Um, Alice? I think your very important date is here.”

She flinched. Her neighbor's deep voice had come from just outside her open bedroom door, and here she stood in her bra only a few feet away! She hurriedly snatched up the sweater that now lay in a heap, struggled to straighten it out and throw it on, then marched into the living room to, indeed, find Mr. Hot-and-Scruffy had just walked right up the stairs into her apartment!

“What are you doing up here?” she spat.

He blinked, apparently not having expected her reprimand. “Well, I thought I should let you know he was here. Since there isn't exactly a door for him to knock on.” He held up his hands in defense once again. “And I didn't want to be the one to try to explain that.”

Ugh, he was right. He was only trying to be helpful and she was snapping at him.

That was when, from downstairs, a male voice called, “Um, hello? Is anyone here? I'm looking for Christy ... but maybe I have the wrong place.”

“Crap,” she whispered.

“Better not just stand there,” her neighbor said, and a mere glance into his eyes, even now, made her breath go shallow. *But don't give him so much credit – maybe it's all of this making you feel unable to breathe.*

Regardless, she looked back and forth between him and the sound of Jared's voice, then gave him a rough shove toward the bedroom. “Get in there,” she said under her breath. “And be quiet. I don't want him getting the wrong idea.”

Then she rushed toward the stairs in bare feet and bad hair. She was far from ready, but she had no choice. She didn't want Jared to leave, after all.

Reaching the head of the stairs, she peered down to find him staring up, looking all clean-cut and well-dressed – and also perplexed. “Hey, hi!” she said, pasting on a smile. “I'm so sorry about the mess down there. Minor disaster when I got home today.” She forced a laugh. “And I'm running a little late, but I'll be down in just a minute, okay?”



That's when she realized he actually looked a little surprised to see her – like maybe he was hoping *he* had the wrong place. At the moment, she couldn't blame him. "So ... what happened to your door? Did someone break in or something?"

It was tempting to say yes – that would be a good reason, after all, for a door to be off its hinges. But that would only lead to further lies and make a bad situation worse, so she just said, "No, nothing like that." Then she tried to laugh again, more light-heartedly this time – but it came out sounding as fake as it was.

He looked back at the door. "Then what happened?"

Sheesh, what was his obsession with her door? Even if it *was* weird – couldn't he just go with the flow here a little?

"It's the funniest story," she claimed, trying to blow off his concern. "I'll tell you over dinner."

That was when he narrowed his gaze on her, or more precisely, it seemed, on her sweater. Was he staring at her chest? "What?" she said, blinking.

"Is your sweater inside out?"

She glanced down. Looked at the sleeve. Saw the thick seam running up to her shoulder. Oh God. Another laugh echoed automatically from her throat. It sounded a little maniacal to her this time. "Oh wow, looks like it is." Then she rolled her eyes. "You won't believe what a crazy day I've had."

By now, Jared had begun to look a little skeptical – about everything. "I'm ... not sure I really want to know."

"Huh?" she asked, the confidence she'd so desperately tried to keep afloat beginning to waver.

His expression turned dark, disappointed, judgmental. "And did I hear a guy's voice up there with you just now?"

She tried to breathe. "Yes, but that's just my neighbor."

And now it was Jared throwing up his hands, clearly ready to back away from this situation. "You know what? I'm not sure what's going on here, but I'm starting to think this was a bad idea."

And as he turned to walk away – stepping awkwardly past the fallen front door – Christy said, "Jared, wait – I can explain. Really!"

But Jared didn't wait. He just kept working his way past the door, until he stepped out into the evening sun now hitting the front porch, then disappeared from view.

And her heart dropped.

She couldn't believe it. All she'd done to try to pull off this date. And it ended like this? And he'd seemed like a really good guy, too – the kind who *would* maybe be crazy about her and want to help her. And the kind who – perhaps wisely – steered clear of crazy people. Her hopes plummeted as she stared at the spot he'd just vacated.

"That's a shame," her neighbor said from behind her.

Turning dejectedly, in her inside-out sweater and bad hair, to find him standing just outside the bedroom door, she numbly said, "You have no idea."

"He drove a Jag, too," the neighbor informed her. "A nice one."

And Christy's jaw dropped. She'd realized Jared had money, though she hadn't actually known how much. But to be driving a Jaguar at his age – mid-to-late twenties she guessed – that said a lot. "Oh God – really?" she replied, feeling the full potential of what she'd just lost.

In response, Mr. Hot-and-Scruffy lowered his chin and said, "I think I get it now."

"Get what?" she asked, mentally exhausted.

"Why that date was so important."

And on top of every other letdown of the last few hours – and the last few years – it stung to realize her neighbor thought she was the one thing that she so, so desperately didn't want to be: a woman who wanted a man only for his money.

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