



Beyond the Red Carpet

Author: *Carol Wyatt*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Power couple Vanessa Prescott and Lauren Sanders, both 48, have ruled Hollywood for years until Lauren's scandalous affair with a much younger pop star explodes across the tabloids. With her career and reputation in tatters, Vanessa's agent proposes a desperate solution: a fake romance with rising star Kate Monroe. But what begins as damage control ignites an undeniable attraction to the stunning 30-year-old Kate, throwing Vanessa's life and heart into utter chaos.

This woman, who has held a secret crush on Vanessa for years, could be her second chance at love.

Total Pages (Source): 37

Vanessa Prescott's bare feet padded across the marble floors toward the living room. Through the archway, she spotted Elliot's salt-and-pepper hair bent over the coffee table. Her steps slowed. Rather than the stack of real estate listings she'd hoped for, she couldn't miss the stack of tabloids in her agent's arms.

"I thought Logan had found something in the Hills." Vanessa leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed.

Elliot's rings caught the light as his hands arranged and rearranged the tabloids. "Oh honey, I wish that's why I was here." He tapped a perfectly manicured nail against one particularly garish headline. "But we need to discuss your image rehabilitation strategy."

The magazines screamed up at her in bold text and grainy photos as she entered the room. Two weeks of speculation about Lauren's indiscretion with that pop star splashed across every cover. Vanessa's jaw tightened. She'd managed to avoid most of the coverage by holing up in the house, but here it was, invading her sanctuary.

"I don't need an image rehabilitation. I wasn't the one caught with someone half my age."

"No darling, you weren't. But the industry has a way of painting both parties with the same brush, deserved or not." Elliot straightened his designer blazer. "And that's exactly what we need to address."

Vanessa sank into the cream armchair, her fingers curling around the armrest. Elliot's hands moved with practiced precision as he arranged another row of glossy magazines beneath the first. Her throat constricted at the new headlines: "Love Blooms: Lauren and Ruby's Red-Hot Romance" and "Pop Princess Steals Hollywood Star's Heart."

"Two weeks." Elliot's voice cut through her spiraling thoughts. "Just fourteen days, and they've managed to spin this into a modern fairytale."

Two weeks ago, Vanessa had been sitting at the breakfast bar in the kitchen. Steam curled gently from her ceramic mug, filling the air with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. The Los Angeles Times, still crisp and unopened, lay on the kitchen counter, waiting to be read.

Her phone had buzzed against the countertop.

"Have you seen it?" Elliot's voice carried an edge she'd never heard before.

"Seen what?"

"Turn your TV on and find any entertainment news channel. Right now."

The remote control was cool in her palm as she pointed it toward the living room TV. The screen blinked to life, and her world imploded.

Lauren's midnight blue Armani blazer—the one Vanessa had given her for Christmas—was unmistakable even in the grainy nighttime footage. She was backing one of the most famous women in the world, pop sensation, Ruby, up against the brick wall, their bodies pressed together, Lauren's fingers tangled in the singer's signature blond hair. The timestamp read 10:42 PM, last Tuesday. The night Lauren had texted about a meeting that had run late with some executives.

More images flashed across the screen. Lauren and Ruby sharing an intimate dinner. Ducking into the hotel.

The ceramic mug slipped from Vanessa's grasp, shattering against the floor. Dark liquid splashed across her bare feet, but she didn't feel the burn. Her pulse thundered in her ears as she took the stairs, her footsteps echoing through their too-quiet house.

Their bedroom—their bedroom—was still dark, heavy curtains drawn against the morning sun. Lauren lay curled up on her side of the bed, her face peaceful in sleep, as if she hadn't destroyed everything they'd built over the past decade.

Vanessa grabbed the edge of the comforter. "Get out." Her voice was ice, breaking the silence.

Lauren's eyes fluttered open, confusion clouding her features for a split second before understanding dawned. "Ness, wait. I can explain?—"

"Get. Out."

Even now, it was hard to look at the headlines Elliot had spread across the coffee table. Vanessa's gaze fixed on a photo of Lauren staring at Ruby with unguarded affection - a look she hadn't seen directed her way in months. Maybe years. The realization hit harder than the betrayal itself.

"The public loves a good romance," Elliot continued as he smoothed another magazine into place. "And right now, they're eating this up. Lauren's team has orchestrated this masterfully. They've transformed her from villain to victim of circumstance in record time."

Vanessa's fingers pressed against her temples. The headlines swam before her: "Inside Lauren and Ruby's Whirlwind Romance," "Hollywood's Hottest New

Couple,” “Love Wins.” Each one more nauseating than the last.

“Which brings me to why I’m really here.” Elliot swept the magazines aside, clearing space on the coffee table. “We need to change the narrative.”

Vanessa’s chest tightened. The last thing she wanted was to play into this media circus. Her private life had already been torn apart and dissected on every entertainment blog from here to New York.

“I’ve got contacts at several major outlets.” Elliot leaned forward, his eyes bright with possibility. “One exclusive interview, carefully placed photos... We can shift the whole story.”

“I don’t have any projects coming up.” Vanessa pulled her knees to her chest, making herself smaller in the oversized armchair. “The Paramount deal fell through last month.”

“Oh darling, I’m not talking about your career.” Elliot’s smile widened. “I’m talking about your love life.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

The words hit like ice water. Vanessa stared at him, mouth slightly parted. “My love life? Elliot, I can barely leave this house without having panic attacks. The thought of dating anyone right now-”

“Who said anything about real dating?” He raised an eyebrow. “What you need is a carefully orchestrated romance. Something to capture the public’s imagination, show them you’ve moved on.”

“You want me to fake a relationship?” The very idea made her stomach turn. “I’m not interested in playing games. I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready to date again, let alone pretend to.”

“Think of it as a role, darling. The best performance of your career. The wronged woman who found love again. You’ll be the one making headlines then.”

Vanessa shook her head. “No. Absolutely not.” The words came out sharp, defensive. “I won’t parade around town with some stranger just to sell magazines.”

“You’re thinking about this all wrong.” Elliot took a seat on the sofa and crossed his legs. “This isn’t about selling magazines. It’s about taking back your power.”

The thought of pretending to date someone made her feel a little sick, yet something in Elliot’s words caught hold. Lauren’s new relationship dominated every headline. Each photo op painted her ex-partner as the brave woman who’d followed her heart, leaving Vanessa cast as the bitter, jilted lover.

“The industry is brutal.” Elliot’s voice softened. “You disappear now, they’ll write

whatever they please. But if you're out there, living your life, finding happiness..." He spread his hands wide. "Well, that's a story worth telling."

The logic began to sink in. She'd spent two weeks hiding in this house, letting others control the conversation. Maybe it was time to change that.

"Even if—" Vanessa paused, hating how her voice wavered. "Even if I considered this ridiculous plan, who would agree to such an arrangement? It's not exactly a typical acting job."

Elliot's lips curved into that familiar smile, the one he wore when all his careful planning aligned. "Actually, I have someone in mind. Someone perfect for this particular role."

"Who?"

Elliot adjusted his cufflinks, his eyes fixed on some point beyond her shoulder. "Let me speak with her first. Make sure she's interested in the arrangement."

"You've already picked someone." The idea that he'd planned this, perhaps days ago, didn't sit well with her.

"I have a meeting with her right after I leave here. Other business to discuss." He gathered the magazines into a neat stack. "Once I gauge her interest, we can move forward."

"This isn't a movie deal, Elliot. You can't just—"

"Trust me, darling." He rose from the couch, brushing invisible lint from his blazer. "I've never steered you wrong before."

The confidence in his voice made her pause. In the last twenty-two years, he hadn't failed her once, not with her career, not with her public image. Even during the darkest days after Lauren's betrayal, his guidance had kept her head above water.

"I'll call you tonight." Elliot tucked the magazines under his arm. "Try to get some rest. You look exhausted."

Vanessa watched Elliot's retreating figure as he strode toward the door. Was she really going to do this?

2

Kate curled her legs beneath her on the sofa, her gaze drifting to the script on the coffee table for the third time since Elliot arrived. The bold black letters on the cover page beckoned. After a week of anticipation, Elliot finally had the script for her, and it sat right there, within reach.

Elliot sat across from her on the loveseat, his designer loafers tapping an irregular beat against her wood floors. The setting sun cast long shadows through her living room windows, painting everything in amber hues. His silence stretched on as he studied her face with an intensity that made her skin prickle.

"You're making me nervous." Kate tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "What's going on?"

"You know I always have your best interests at heart. And sometimes opportunities arise that we need to... carefully consider."

"This isn't about the script, is it?"

"The script can wait." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I have a

proposition that could change everything for you.”

Kate’s stomach dropped. The last time Elliot had used that tone, he’d convinced her to take a role that ended up launching her career. But something in his expression now, a calculated gleam in his eyes, told her this was different.

Kate’s pulse quickened as Elliot’s words sank in. Had he found something better than the script he’d brought with him?

“I know you’ve shown remarkable restraint these past few weeks. Months really.” Elliot’s voice softened. “Waiting to come out when you were ready to shout it from the rooftops.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

She pressed her lips together as she slowly nodded. She'd spent countless nights drafting social media posts, only to delete them by morning. Each time, Elliot's voice echoed in her head: Wait for the right moment. Don't do something like this on a whim.

"The universe has handed us the perfect opportunity." He straightened his tie. "An A-list actress needs a girlfriend. Well, a pretend one. For the press."

Kate's mouth fell open. "What?" This was not the kind of opportunity she needed.

"Think about it. You'd make headlines, but on your terms. Protected. Strategic." His eyes lit up with the same enthusiasm he showed when pitching her breakthrough role. "This could be your moment."

The California sun beat through the windows, too bright, too harsh. Kate stood, needing to move, to process. Her bare feet pressed against the cool floor as she paced.

"I don't-" She shook her head. "Coming out isn't a publicity stunt, Elliot. It's my life."

"Of course it is. But why not make it work for your career too?"

"By pretending to date someone?" She couldn't even believe she was having this conversation. This was not why she waited to come out. "That's not how I want to do this. I want it to be real. Honest."

Elliot's expression shifted. "Kate-"

“No.” She crossed her arms. “I won’t start my truth with a lie.”

Elliot pushed himself up from the loveseat. “Would it help if I told you who it was?”

The question hung in the air. Kate’s fingers stilled their nervous dance along her forearm. Her mind raced through the possibilities. Which A-list actress would be desperate enough to want a fake girlfriend?

“Maybe.”

“Kate.” His voice dropped lower, serious in a way she rarely heard. “What I’m about to tell you - the mere possibility that this person is considering a fake relationship - it absolutely cannot leave this room. Not a word to anyone.”

She turned then, studying his face. The usual playful glint in his eyes had vanished, replaced by an intensity that made her realize just how serious this was.

“Of course.” Kate wrapped her arms tighter around herself. “I won’t say anything.”

“Okay.” Elliot inhaled a deep breath. “It’s Vanessa Prescott.

“Vanessa Prescott?” Her voice came out as a whisper.

“The one and only.”

Kate sank onto the sofa arm. The same Vanessa Prescott whose performances had inspired her to pursue acting. The woman whose coming out story had given her hope during sleepless nights.

“That’s-” She shook her head. “No. That can’t be right.”

“And why not?”

“Because she’s-” Kate’s throat tightened. “She’s Vanessa Prescott.”

The name alone carried weight, decades of acclaimed performances and industry respect. Kate pictured Vanessa at award shows, commanding red carpets with an effortless sophistication that Kate could only dream of matching.

“She wouldn’t want someone like me.” The words slipped out before Kate could stop them. “I mean, there must be dozens of more established actresses who’d jump at the chance.”

“You underestimate yourself. And you underestimate what Vanessa needs right now.”

Kate’s mind raced with images of Vanessa: her graceful presence at premieres, that infectious laugh during interviews, the way she’d thanked her longtime partner Lauren in acceptance speeches. Lauren, who’d just thrown it all away.

“But why me?” Kate’s voice cracked. “There has to be someone else. Someone more... suitable.”

Elliot’s eyebrows arched. “Have you seen the headlines? Lauren’s writing her own fairytale with Ruby. She’s so famous, she doesn’t need a last name.”

Kate doubted that there wasn’t a person in the world who didn’t know her name or her music. And for the past two weeks, the singer’s face had been splashed across every entertainment site, always with Lauren by her side.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“The industry loves a good parallel narrative.” Elliot held her gaze. “Lauren chose youth and vitality? Well, Vanessa deserves her own fresh start.”

“With me?” The words came out smaller than Kate intended.

“The press loves nothing more than a rising star.” Elliot’s hands moved with practiced animation. “And you are blazing across their radar. Your latest film’s creating a lot of buzz.”

Her throat dried. “That’s different.”

“Is it? The timing couldn’t be more perfect. Vanessa needs someone the public can root for. Someone genuine, talented, and yes-” He paused. “Someone who’s been wanting to share their truth with the world.”

Kate sighed. Of course, Elliot would leverage her desire to come out. He’d been tempering that impulse for months, always finding reasons to wait. Now here he was, dangling it like a prize.

“You’ve been wanting to do this for a while now, and I’ve told you to wait.” His voice softened. “And when I asked you to wait, I never could have imagined an opportunity like this coming your way. What better way to come out than to be on the arm of a legendary actress like Vanessa Prescott?”

The mere thought of standing beside Vanessa, of being introduced as her girlfriend, even if just for show, sent Kate’s pulse racing. She’d watched Vanessa’s coming out interview so many times she could quote it verbatim. The grace, the dignity, the way

she'd owned every word.

"Think about it." Elliot's voice cut through her thoughts. "You get to come out on your terms, with built-in support from one of Hollywood's most respected actresses. Vanessa knows what it's like to come out when no one is expecting it. And she gets to show Lauren, and the world, that she's moved on with someone..." He waved his hand in Kate's direction, "...who is absolutely perfect for her."

Kate's heart pounded in her chest as Elliot's words sank in. This is not what she had in mind when she'd told him months ago that she wanted to come out. She'd been trying to decide between a one-on-one interview or spontaneously coming out on the red carpet some day. Fake dating Vanessa Prescott had not been one of the options.

But now that it was... Would it really be so bad?

"What do you think?" Elliot's voice broke through her thoughts. "Will you do it?"

Her chest tightened at the thought of standing next to Vanessa at events, sharing secret glances, playing the part of...

A detail nagged at her, something that didn't quite fit. She lifted her gaze to meet Elliot's expectant expression.

"How did you propose this to Vanessa?"

The corner of Elliot's mouth twitched, almost imperceptibly. He adjusted the cuff of his sleeve, a gesture Kate recognized from countless contract negotiations.

"If you're asking whether I outed you-" Elliot's voice took on a defensive edge. "I would never betray your trust like that."

Kate's shoulders relaxed a fraction, but the knot in her stomach remained. "Then how did you pitch this idea to her?"

"I simply suggested that I knew someone who might be perfect for what she needs right now. Someone talented, discreet, and..." He paused, smoothing an invisible wrinkle from his pants. "Someone who understands the complexities of Hollywood's expectations."

"So she doesn't know that I'm gay or that I'm thinking of using this as a way to come out?"

"No." Elliot's response was immediate.

Kate exhaled, running her fingers through her hair. The thought of Vanessa not knowing felt both relieving and terrifying.

Kate pushed herself off the arm of the sofa. "How can you be sure she'll even want me?"

"Kate--"

"No, really. Vanessa Prescott could have anyone. There must be dozens of actresses who'd be more..." She gestured vaguely at the air, searching for words.

"More what?"

"More her type." The more Kate thought about this, more problems started to pop up. "She's used to being with someone established. Someone powerful. Lauren Sanders isn't exactly an easy act to follow."

Elliot's eyes narrowed. "Is that what this is about? You're comparing yourself to

Lauren?”

“I’m being realistic.” Kate wrapped her arms around herself. “What if she wants-” The words caught in her throat as an image of Vanessa’s smile flashed through her mind, the way her eyes crinkled at the corners during interviews. Kate’s chest tightened. “What if I-”

She stopped herself, heat rising to her cheeks. She couldn’t say it out loud, not even to Elliot.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

She couldn't admit that her biggest fear wasn't Vanessa rejecting her, but rather it was falling for someone who would only see their relationship as a publicity stunt.

Elliot studied her. "What if you what?"

"Nothing." Kate shook her head. "It's not important."

"I'm calling Vanessa tonight," Elliot said. "But I needed to check with you first. To see if you were interested."

The script on her coffee table caught her eye again. The role she'd been so excited about moments ago now seemed trivial compared to this opportunity.

"Are you?" Elliot pressed.

"Yes." The word escaped before she could second-guess herself. "But Elliot, she needs to know. About me. Before anything else. I need her to be happy with me and what I stand to gain from this arrangement. I don't want her to feel blindsided."

"Of course." He nodded, pulling out his phone. "I'll make the call tonight. Set up a meeting."

Kate's stomach flipped. She'd have to look her in the eye and pretend this was just business, just another role to play. When really, it was everything she'd dreamed of and feared wrapped into one impossible package.

"Kate?" Elliot's voice softened. "Are you sure about this?"

She met his eyes, channeling the confidence she wore on red carpets. “Yes. I’m sure.”

3

Vanessa stared through the window of her living room, the late afternoon sun sinking lower in the sky. Elliot’s words from last night played on repeat in her mind.

“It’s the perfect opportunity, Vanessa. You can take back the narrative. This fake romance will be a win-win for both you and Kate.”

When Vanessa hadn’t immediately agreed to this meeting, Elliot had continued.

“It’s time to take back your power, Vanessa. And I promise, Kate will be fully on board. I understand your hesitation, but this is the best move for both your career and your personal image. Trust me, Vanessa.”

Could she do it? Could she pretend to be in love again, especially with someone so different from Lauren? Kate Monroe was vibrant, full of life, and hungry for success. A young rising star, just thirty years old, agreeing to a manufactured romance with someone nearly twenty years her senior.

The concept bordered on absurd.

The money she’d offered was substantial, more than enough to entice most actresses into such an arrangement. But something about Kate’s quick acceptance nagged at her.

Why would someone like Kate Monroe, with her whole career ahead of her, willingly let the world believe she was interested in women? The publicity angle made sense, but the personal implications...

The doorbell rang, snapping her back to the present. Vanessa froze, her gaze dropping to assess her outfit for the hundredth time. She wore dark jeans and a cream silk blouse, its top buttons undone to reveal a silver pendant resting just below her collarbone. Her hair fell in loose waves, framing her face in a way that suggested effort without trying too hard.

What exactly was the dress code for meeting your arranged girlfriend? Too casual might appear dismissive, too formal could make things awkward. She'd changed four times before settling on this ensemble, aiming for that elusive balance between sophisticated and approachable.

The doorbell rang again.

Vanessa drew in a steadying breath and opened the door. Kate Monroe stood on her doorstep, her blonde hair catching the last rays of sunlight. Elliot lingered a step behind, a smile tugging at his lips, clearly impressed with himself for orchestrating this entire charade. Vanessa felt a twinge of annoyance at his smug expression, but she maintained her composure, straightening her posture and offering a warm, confident smile to her supposed new love interest.

As Elliot stepped forward to make the introductions, Vanessa's heart raced, and her breath hitched ever so slightly. This was it. The moment when their scheme would be set in motion, for better or for worse.

"Vanessa, I'd like you to meet Kate Monroe." Elliot stepped into the foyer, guiding Kate forward with a light touch to her shoulder. "And Kate, the incomparable Vanessa Prescott."

Kate extended her hand. Her palm was soft and warm against Vanessa's skin, the contact lingering a beat longer than necessary. Up close, those blue eyes held an intensity that caught Vanessa off guard.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Ms. Prescott. I’ve admired your work for years.” Kate’s voice carried a hint of breathiness, her cheeks flushed pink.

“Please, call me Vanessa.” She released Kate’s hand and gestured toward the living room. “Come in. Make yourselves comfortable in the living room.”

“Shall we discuss the details?” Elliot asked as he took a seat, but Vanessa held up her hand.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“First, would either of you like a drink? I have an excellent Cabernet breathing.”

“That would be lovely,” Kate said.

Vanessa left them and moved to the kitchen, pulling three glasses from the cabinet. She took a steadying breath. At least the familiar routine of hosting gave her something concrete to focus on, a momentary reprieve from the surreal nature of this meeting.

“Now then,” Elliot’s voice carried from the living room. “Let’s discuss how we’re going to make this work, shall we?”

Vanessa carried the wine and glasses into the living room. She poured with steady hands, distributing the glasses before sitting across from them in the armchair.

Elliot wasted no time. “We’ll start with some low-key sightings together. Paparazzi, of course, but we’ll also need social media posts. Nothing too overt at first. Just subtle hints that you’re spending time together.”

Vanessa listened, her gaze flicking to Kate, taking in the younger woman’s reactions. Elliot continued, mapping out a series of orchestrated appearances and suggesting ways to make their relationship seem authentic to the public eye.

“And we’ll want some intimate photos, maybe a kiss...” Elliot trailed off, seemingly lost in thought, no doubt imagining the tabloid headlines that would ensue.

Vanessa took a sip of her wine, her mind elsewhere. Why was Kate really doing this?

The money was a factor, no doubt. She'd offered an amount that would be hard to refuse, especially for a rising star. But there was more to it, she sensed.

Last night, after agreeing to Elliot's scheme, she'd looked up Kate's recent work. Kate's talent was evident, and her profile was rising. Her last three roles would have netted her a decent paycheck, so money alone didn't quite explain her willingness to participate in this charade.

As Elliot outlined the next steps, his phone buzzed with a call. He glanced at the screen, his eyebrows furrowing. "I need to take this. It's one of my other clients."

Vanessa didn't miss the satisfied glint in his eyes. It wouldn't surprise her if he'd staged that call to create an opportunity for her and Kate to talk alone.

"By all means," she said. "We can continue without you."

Elliot stood, smoothing his suit jacket. "I won't be long."

Vanessa watched him leave, his footsteps echoing in the hallway, before turning back to Kate. They were alone for the first time since this idea had been thrust upon them. Kate shifted in her seat, her fingers wrapped loosely around the wine glass.

Vanessa studied Kate as she swirled the wine in her glass, her fingers slender around the stem.

"I'm so sorry about what happened with Lauren," Kate said, her voice soft, breaking the silence that had settled between them. Her words carried a trace of nervousness. "The last few weeks must have been..." She trailed off, her eyes flicking down as if searching for the right phrase, some expression to encapsulate the chaos and hurt Vanessa had endured. "Difficult," she finished, her tone tinged with sympathy.

Vanessa met Kate's gaze. "The hardest of my life," she said. It was a simple statement, but it held the weight of her world, the wreckage of a decade-long partnership, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

"I was surprised when Elliot approached me with this idea," Kate said, "but I understand why you're doing it. Taking control of the narrative or whatever Elliot calls it."

"Why are you doing this?" The question escaped Vanessa's lips before she could overthink it.

Kate's eyes widened, caught off-guard. "I..."

"For the money, I assume?" Vanessa pressed, her gaze sharpening. "It's a substantial sum. No one would blame you."

Kate shook her head, her cheeks flushing. "I can't take your money, Vanessa. I agreed to this for another reason entirely."

Vanessa raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite herself. "Oh?"

Kate set her glass down on the coffee table, her movements deliberate. "I want to be honest with you, Vanessa. This fake relationship... It's a chance for me to come out."

Vanessa baulked, the wine glass freezing halfway to her lips. "Come out?"

Kate leaned forward. "I've wanted to come out for weeks now. Elliot advised me to wait—to find the right opportunity, not just blurt it out on some red carpet."

Kate took a breath, her eyes never leaving Vanessa's. "I knew I was gay since I was seventeen, but I made a conscious decision to come to L.A. and try to make a name

for myself first.” Her voice wavered. “Time just got away from me. One role led to another, and I kept thinking that after the next one, then it would be the right time to come out. But the truth is, I’ve been feeling so guilty about hiding who I am.”

Vanessa stared at Kate. That was probably the last thing that she could have imagined Kate saying. Clearly, her gaydar was rusty, but then again, Vanessa hadn’t used it in ten years.

“Kate.” Vanessa set her wine glass down. “Are you sure this is how you want to do it?” She leaned forward, searching Kate’s face. “I know how persuasive Elliot can be. Look at me,” she said with a hint of a smile. “I’m actually entertaining this whole scheme.” A soft laugh escaped her lips. “But this is your story to tell. It should be on your terms.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Kate looked away for a second. “No. I know, and when Elliot first suggested this, I said no. But the more I thought about it, the more sense it made.” Her eyes met Vanessa’s. “I’ve looked up to you for years, not just as an actress, but for how you handled coming out.”

Vanessa pressed her lips together, hating the way Kate’s words suddenly made her feel old.

“I don’t know, Kate.” Vanessa let out a breath, pausing to gather her thoughts. “I appreciate your honesty, and I do understand the desire to control the narrative. Believe me, I do. But are you sure this is how you want to come out? With someone so much older than you? We can’t control every headline.”

Kate’s expression shifted, determination replacing her earlier nervousness. “I don’t care about the age difference.” Her voice dropped lower, more intimate. “If anything... I’ve always been drawn to older women.”

The admission hung in the air between them. Vanessa’s chest tightened, her mind racing to process Kate’s words. She’d expected deflection, perhaps even embarrassment about their age gap. Instead, Kate’s directness caught her off guard.

“I’m not going to lie, Kate. I didn’t want to resort to these kinds of tactics.” She exhaled softly. “I know Elliot means well, but it’s easy for him to orchestrate our lives when he’s not the one in the spotlight. When he’s not the one reading the headlines about his broken relationship or waking up to his face plastered on every tabloid.”

Kate's chin lifted, a flash of determination crossing her features. "I get it. This is not ideal. But please don't be worried about me, about how this will affect my career. I've thought this through." Her voice carried a quiet strength that made Vanessa pause. "This arrangement, while somewhat crazy, works for both of us. You get to take back some of those headlines, and I get to come out on my own terms. With someone I..." She paused, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. "With someone I genuinely admire."

The earnestness in Kate's voice struck something in Vanessa. There was no trace of the calculated ambition she'd come to expect from younger actresses. Instead, Kate's words rang with authenticity that was becoming increasingly rare in Hollywood.

"So." Kate's eyes locked with Vanessa's. "If you're still willing to do this, knowing everything I've told you... I'm in. Completely in. For however long this takes."

Vanessa studied Kate's face, searching for any hint of hesitation or doubt. She found none. Just that steady, unwavering gaze that seemed to see right through her carefully constructed walls.

"This is crazy." The words escaped Vanessa's lips before she could stop them. "This whole situation is..."

"Yes." Kate's smile held a hint of humor. "It's crazy."

Vanessa took a deep breath, hardly believing that she was agreeing to this. "But I'm in, too."

Kate's face lit up, a radiant smile transforming her features.

The sound of Elliot's footsteps echoed down the hallway, growing louder. He strode back into the living room, phone still in hand, eyebrows raised in question.

“Well?” His gaze darted between them. “Are we doing this?”

“Yes, we’re doing this,” Vanessa said. The words felt surreal leaving her mouth.

“Excellent.” Elliot clapped his hands together. “I’ve already drafted a preliminary schedule. We’ll start with casual sightings - coffee shops, maybe a hike in Runyon Canyon. Then progress to more intimate settings.”

Vanessa’s jaw clenched. “Elliot, we just agreed to this. Can we have a moment before you turn our lives into a production schedule?”

“Time is of the essence, darling. The sooner we get ahead of Lauren’s narrative-”

“Lauren’s narrative isn’t going anywhere.” Vanessa’s voice carried an edge that made both Elliot and Kate straighten. “And I won’t be rushed into this just because you’re excited about the PR potential.”

Kate leaned forward. “What if we start small? Maybe dinner tomorrow night? Something private, just to talk and get comfortable with each other?”

The suggestion surprised Vanessa. It was sensible, measured, and exactly what she needed to hear in that moment. She studied Kate’s face, finding none of Elliot’s eager calculation, just genuine openness.

“Dinner would be perfect.” Vanessa felt some of her tension ease. “I know a place in Venice Beach. The owner’s an old friend who knows how to keep the paparazzi at bay.”

4

Kate watched Vanessa, trying not to stare as the older woman perused the menu. The

candlelight danced across Vanessa's features, accentuating the elegant lines of her face, the soft curve of her lips. She was breathtaking, her nearly black hair falling in loose waves around her shoulders, her hazel eyes studying the menu intently.

The restaurant was hushed, intimate. Exactly as Vanessa had promised. They were tucked away in a quiet corner, a discreet haven for their first "date." The soft murmur of conversations and the clink of cutlery against plates provided a soothing backdrop, but Kate found it hard to relax.

This was a dangerous game for her. Sitting across from her long-time crush, pretending that this was just another role to play. Kate's feelings for Vanessa went beyond admiration, and she was going to have to constantly balance trying to look like she cared about Vanessa with guarding her own feelings.

Most people would say that Vanessa was an attractive woman. Kate had certainly always thought she was, but when Vanessa came out, Kate's attraction turned from admiration into desire. Not that Kate had ever thought that she would have a chance with Vanessa. Not then and certainly not now.

She took a sip of her wine, hoping the rich Cabernet would calm her nerves. She needed to focus.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

As Vanessa looked up, her eyes locking with Kate's, a small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Kate's heart stuttered, afraid that Vanessa could see the truth, that this arrangement would be called off before they'd even started it.

Vanessa's gaze held hers, and Kate felt a spark of something pass between them. She found herself caught in the intensity of Vanessa's eyes, a warm glow spreading across her cheeks.

"I imagine while Elliot was happy to see us diving right in," Vanessa said, "he won't be happy that we didn't sign those contracts last night."

"Do we really need to sign them now if I'm not taking the money?"

"Maybe not." Vanessa placed her menu down, her fingers smoothing over the leather cover. "Though convincing Elliot to let it go might be a challenge."

"It might work in our favor," Kate said. "Not to have anything on paper."

"That's true." Vanessa twisted the stem of her wine glass.

The waiter arrived, and they placed their orders—a crisp salad for Vanessa, followed by the grilled salmon, and for Kate, the beef carpaccio to start and then the seared scallops. Kate felt butterflies in her stomach as the waiter poured more wine.

She took a breath, reminding herself that this was all part of the act, that this was something she could do. Pretend. But it was challenging to separate her genuine emotions from the performance.

Really, this was entirely normal. Vanessa was probably used to people having a crush on her. Kate needed to reframe this whole situation and lean into that idea. Kate could safely allow her gaze to linger on Vanessa, at least when they were in public. In private, she'd have to turn on her acting skills and tone it all down.

"So, tell me about yourself, Kate." Vanessa leaned forward, resting her elbow on the table, her interest seeming genuine.

"Well, what do you want to know?" Kate asked, her voice steady, belying the nerves fluttering in her stomach. "Or what has Elliot left out? That's probably the better question."

Vanessa shook her head. "He's told me nothing. I know a little bit about your career, but not much else." She reached for her glass, her eyes holding Kate's. "Why did you want to be an actress?"

Kate paused. It was a simple question, one she'd answered countless times in interviews, yet Vanessa's direct gaze made it feel different, more personal.

"I think I was sixteen or even seventeen before the idea that I could even be an actress really started to take hold," Kate began, her voice soft, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. "But if I look back, I'd always been fascinated with the idea that someone could step into another person's life so completely that they made you forget who they really were. That they could make you believe in the story they were telling so deeply that your own world disappeared for a while. My mom used to take me to this movie theater every Saturday. It was this really old place, with velvet seats and a vintage feel about it, and they showed classics every Saturday afternoon. I remember being completely in awe of feeling like for two hours I was away in another part of the world, living someone else's life."

Kate could have gone on, but she made herself stop, heat coming to her cheeks as she

took a sip of wine. She didn't have to explain to Vanessa how amazing it was to be an actress.

"Which movie made the biggest impression?" Vanessa asked.

"The Barefoot Contessa," Kate answered without second guessing why that movie came into her head, a soft smile playing on her lips at the memory. "I was only thirteen or fourteen when I saw it, and it completely blew me away. Ava Gardner's screen presence was magnetic, the way she carried herself..."

Kate paused, her eyes flicking up to meet Vanessa's, and she felt her pulse quicken at the intensity she found there. "It's funny," Kate continued, "I hadn't thought about that film in a while, but now, sitting here, I realize how much it must have influenced me."

"In what way?" Vanessa leaned forward, her expression curious, encouraging Kate to continue.

"Well, the main character, Maria Vargas, she's this incredibly strong, independent woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to go after it. But at the same time, she has this vulnerability, this soft side, that makes her relatable." Kate took a sip of her wine. "And I think I've seen just about every Ava Gardner movie since."

As Kate spoke, she saw a thoughtful expression cross Vanessa's face, and she wondered if her words had resonated in some way. The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken thoughts, and Kate found herself searching Vanessa's eyes for answers to questions she hadn't yet voiced.

"So," Vanessa said, breaking the moment with a playful lift of her eyebrows, "it seems I've uncovered your type."

Kate felt her cheeks warm at the implication, her pulse quickening as she realized where this line of questioning was headed. “What do you mean?” she asked, her voice a little breathless.

“Hey, I’m not judging. Who wouldn’t have a crush on Ava Gardner? I know I did, but I was more interested in Betty Grable or maybe Lana Turner, if we’re sticking with that time period.”

Kate’s heart hammered in her chest as she met Vanessa’s gaze, a mix of emotions flashing across her eyes. She could see the playful glint in Vanessa’s eyes, but beneath it, there was something more, a hint of curiosity, perhaps even something akin to interest.

“So you have a thing for blondes?” Kate asked, running her fingers through her own golden hair with deliberate casualness. “Good to know.”

“Another reason Elliot’s plan might actually work,” Vanessa said, her eyes lingering on Kate’s hair.

The waiter materialized at their table, balancing two white plates with practiced grace. He placed the carpaccio before Kate, its paper-thin slices of beef arranged in a delicate pattern, dotted with capers and shavings of parmesan. Vanessa’s salad was a vibrant composition of fresh greens and roasted pine nuts.

“Can I get you ladies anything else?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“No,” Kate said, her gaze shifting to Vanessa.

“We’re fine, thank you,” Vanessa said, picking up her fork.

The waiter left them alone again. Kate picked up her own fork, grateful for the momentary distraction of food. She needed these few seconds to compose herself, to steady her racing pulse.

“You know, everyone remembers Ava Gardner’s beauty in that film,” Vanessa said. “But what stays with me is Maria’s loneliness.” Vanessa’s fingers played with the stem of her wine glass. “The way she kept trying to break free of other people’s expectations.” She took a sip of wine. “And the irony doesn’t escape me,” Vanessa said, a wry smile playing on her lips. “Here we are, trying to shape our own story, just like those men did with Maria. Though I suppose at least we’re the ones writing the script this time.”

“Maria Vargas was just a character in a movie,” Kate said, keeping her tone light. “And we’re just two actresses having dinner.”

Kate watched Vanessa take another bite of her salad, still processing their conversation. The whole evening had taken on a dreamlike quality - the intimate setting, the easy flow of conversation, Vanessa’s undivided attention. If someone had told her a week ago she’d be sitting across from Vanessa Prescott, discussing old Hollywood films and sharing meaningful glances, she would have laughed it off as fantasy.

But this wasn’t a real date. Kate had to keep reminding herself of that fact. The

warmth in Vanessa's eyes, the way she leaned in when Kate spoke, the subtle flirting about blonde actresses - it was all part of their arrangement. Vanessa was simply being professional, making sure they could create convincing chemistry for the cameras.

If they could maintain this easy rapport, if Kate could keep her actual feelings tucked away beneath the surface, they might be able to pull this off.

Kate took another sip of wine, letting its warmth spread through her chest. She could do this. She could separate the fantasy from reality, her genuine attraction from their staged romance. After all, she was an actress. A good one. Pretending was what she did best, even if her racing pulse suggested otherwise.

5

The kitchen's warmth dissipated as Vanessa led Kate through the narrow back corridor of Nico's restaurant. Their heels clicked against the weathered tile floor, echoing off the exposed brick walls. The scent of garlic and herbs lingered in the air.

"Nico always keeps this exit clear." Vanessa pushed open the heavy metal door, holding it for Kate.

Kate stepped into the doorway but paused, turning back to face Vanessa. The dim security light cast shadows across her features, but her blue eyes caught the glow. A strand of blonde hair had escaped from behind her ear, and Vanessa's fingers twitched with an urge to tuck it back into place.

"I had a wonderful time tonight." Kate's voice carried a note of sincerity that transcended their arranged circumstances.

Vanessa remained in the threshold beside her, conscious of the minimal space

between them. “So did I.” The words came out softer than Vanessa intended. She cleared her throat.

She’d chosen this place for its discretion. Nico kept the paparazzi at bay, and the back entrance allowed for private exits. But something caught her eye. A slight movement in the decorative shrubs across the street. The glint of a camera lens peeked through the leaves.

Her hand shot out, a spontaneous reaction to the threat across the street. Her fingers closed around Kate’s wrist, slender and delicate beneath her palm as she turned to step out into the alley. The warmth of Kate’s skin surprised her. Vanessa drew her back into the shelter of the doorway, their bodies momentarily pressed together.

Vanessa lowered her head to Kate’s ear. “There’s a photographer across the street.” Her lips nearly brushed Kate’s skin. “What do you want to do?”

Kate pulled back, her eyes meeting Vanessa’s gaze. A breath escaped her lips. “Are we really doing this?” The proximity amplified every detail of Kate’s face. Her ocean blue eyes, the slight part of her lips, the way her throat moved as she swallowed.

Vanessa’s fingers remained wrapped around Kate’s wrist, her thumb resting against Kate’s pulse point. The rapid beat beneath her touch matched the quickening of her own heart. Vanessa’s gaze locked with Kate’s questioning eyes in the dimly lit doorway. The unspoken weight of their situation hung between them.

The evening replayed in Vanessa’s mind. Their easy conversation over wine, Kate’s smile, the way she’d listened with genuine interest as Vanessa shared stories from her theater days. There had been no awkwardness, no forced smiles.

“Yes.” Vanessa released Kate’s wrist, missing the warmth as soon as she let go. “If you’re ready for this.”

Kate stepped closer, her voice dropping to match the intimacy of their position. “I am.” A smile played at the corners of her mouth. “But hand-holding and quiet dinners won’t make headlines, Vanessa. We need something... more. Something that convinces everyone this is real.”

The suggestion in Kate’s words sent a shiver through her. “What are you saying? That Elliot’s plan isn’t going to work?”

“I’m saying that tonight was supposed to be a friendly dinner where we get to know one another better.” Her eyes darted to the shrubs. “That photographer is probably here for somebody else. What if we took advantage of him being here?”

The logical part of her brain screamed to retreat to her car, because this wasn’t part of Elliot’s carefully crafted plan. His strategy involved calculated appearances, planned photo opportunities. Not this spontaneous, unscripted moment in a back alley.

Kate’s fingers brushed against her arm. “Let me take the lead. Just trust me.” Kate’s voice held a confidence that caught Vanessa off guard. Before she could process the words, Kate’s hand slipped into hers, pulling her from the doorway’s shadows into the alley.

Vanessa’s heels clicked against the pavement as Kate guided her forward with surprising authority. The sounds echoed off the walls, matching the thundering of her heart.

This wasn’t how Vanessa had pictured their arrangement unfolding. In her mind, she’d been the one to guide them through this. She was the veteran actress, the one with years of experience navigating Hollywood’s spotlight.

But Vanessa found herself yielding to Kate’s direction, allowing herself to be led into whatever scene Kate had in mind.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

The feeling of Kate's fingers interlaced with her own sent sparks through Vanessa's up her arm, straight to her racing heart. The simple contact awakened nerve endings she'd forgotten existed. Each point where their palms met, where their fingers intertwined, ignited a subtle yet undeniable recognition that coursed through Vanessa's veins.

How long had it been since anyone had touched her like this? In the last year, maybe even two, she couldn't remember Lauren reaching for her hand. Those kind of romantic moments had been missing from their relationship for years.

But this - this casual intimacy with Kate - set her skin ablaze. The pad of Kate's thumb brushed across her knuckles, and Vanessa's stomach dropped as if she'd missed a step walking downstairs.

She hadn't realized how much she'd missed being touched. How starved she'd become for genuine connection. Kate's thumb swept another arc across her skin, and Vanessa's pulse jumped in response.

And then Kate's pace slowed. The change registered in Vanessa's body before her mind caught up. Their joined hands pulled taut as Kate turned, and Vanessa found herself being guided backward. The wall pressed against her shoulder blades, solid and cool through her silk blouse.

Kate's free hand rose to Vanessa's cheek. The touch burned against her skin, gentle yet electric. Those stunning blue eyes searched her face with an intensity that for a moment made Vanessa forget that they were acting.

This wasn't part of the plan. None of this followed Elliot's careful script. But the thought dissolved as Kate's thumb brushed across her cheekbone.

Kate's gaze dropped to her lips, and Vanessa's pulse thundered in her ears. The space between them diminished. Kate's eyes fluttered closed, and Vanessa's breath caught in her throat. She saw the intent in the subtle tilt of Kate's chin, the slight parting of those full lips.

Vanessa's body responded before her mind could process the action. She couldn't say who initiated the kiss, only that her eyes drifted closed at the same instant their lips met.

The contact sent a shockwave through her. Kate's lips were softer than she'd imagined, a sensation that stole her breath. The kiss ignited every nerve ending, a surge of electricity that left Vanessa reeling.

Her fingers tightened around Kate's, instinctively seeking an anchor in the whirlwind of sensations. The kiss deepened, and the sweet taste of Kate's mouth invaded her senses. She assumed this was part of the act, another calculated maneuver. But when Kate's tongue swept against hers, the tremble that coursed through Vanessa's body confirmed the authenticity of her response.

Their joined hands pressed against the wall, Kate's body arching into hers, and Vanessa could feel the length of her, the press of her thighs, the curve of her waist. A moan escaped Kate's throat, vibrating against Vanessa's lips.

The sound sent a wave of desire through Vanessa.

How long had it been since she'd kissed someone with such passion? Since she'd allowed herself to surrender so fully to a simple touch, to the raw power of a kiss?

Kate's fingers slid into her hair, cupping the back of her head. The gentle tug urged Vanessa to deepen the kiss further, their mouths fusing in a reckless, fiery embrace.

She wanted more. Her body craved it, demanded it. But a flicker of awareness intruded, a reminder that this was a performance. That the photographer across the street was capturing each intimate moment for tomorrow's headlines.

Kate's thumb stroked her cheek, breaking the spell. Their mouths parted, and Vanessa's eyes flickered open, dazed. She caught the hint of a smile on Kate's lips, felt the warmth of her breath mingling with her own.

For a moment, their foreheads rested together. But then reality crashed in. They'd just staged a passionate encounter in a back alley, a risky move that would forever link their names. But in this moment, Vanessa wasn't thinking about Elliot's reaction or the media frenzy to come. She could only focus on the feel of Kate's breath against her lips, the lingering taste of her mouth, and the whisper of Kate's thumb as it brushed her cheek one final time.

Kate stepped back, and Vanessa instantly missed the heat of Kate's body against hers.

Vanessa tried to get her heart rate under control. She placed a hand on Kate's cheek. "We should go," she whispered. "My car isn't far."

Kate's eyes remained hooded, lustrous. She nodded slowly, as if awakening from a trance.

Vanessa found Kate's hand. They'd arrived in their own cars, but if they wanted this to look real, Vanessa needed Kate to leave with her.

Reaching her car, Vanessa paused, her hand still entwined with Kate's. "I can take you home."

Kate glanced at their joined hands, then up at Vanessa, her eyes shimmering in the streetlight. She pressed her lips together. “It wouldn’t look great if we went our separate ways now.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Vanessa said as she let go of Kate’s hand and reached for the passenger door, then stopped, her fingers hovering over the handle. She met Kate’s gaze, seeing the uncertainty reflected in her eyes.

Without a word, Vanessa pressed Kate against the car door. She brushed a stray lock of hair behind Kate’s ear, her fingers lingering there, then slid her hand to cup the back of Kate’s neck, pulling her closer.

Kate’s breath hitched as Vanessa lowered her head, claiming her lips once more. This kiss was different—hungrier, more demanding.

Vanessa’s body burned with a hunger she hadn’t expected. Kate’s lips parted beneath hers, inviting her deeper into the kiss. The heat of Kate’s mouth, the press of her body against hers, the small sounds escaping her throat - it all combined into an intoxicating mix that made Vanessa’s head spin.

What was she doing?

Why had she initiated this second kiss? They’d already given the photographer enough material. This second kiss served no purpose for their arrangement, yet Vanessa couldn’t pull away. Her body moved on instinct, pressing closer as Kate’s tongue swept against hers, one hand tangled in Kate’s hair while the other gripped her hip, drawing her closer. Kate’s fingers dug into her back, and Vanessa’s pulse thundered in response. The kiss deepened, grew more desperate. Their tongues met, and electricity shot through Vanessa’s core.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

She shouldn't be enjoying this so much. Shouldn't crave the taste of Kate's mouth or the way Kate's body melted against hers. This was meant to be an act - a performance for the cameras. But with each passing second, as Kate's hands roamed across her back and their bodies pressed closer, the line between pretense and reality blurred.

Kate's hands slid up her back, pulling her deeper into the kiss. The heat of her touch burned through Vanessa's silk blouse, igniting something primal and hungry within her. She shouldn't want this. She shouldn't crave the soft sounds escaping Kate's throat or the way Kate's body arched into hers.

But she did.

The realization hit her like a slap in the face. She wasn't acting. Not even close. She was kissing Kate because she wanted to. Because the first kiss had awakened something inside her that she couldn't ignore. Something that had nothing to do with headlines or narratives.

Guilt crept in.

Kate was playing a role, following their agreement. But Vanessa's response was real, embarrassingly so. Her body thrummed with desire. What would Kate think if she knew?

Vanessa broke the kiss, her chest heaving. The taste of Kate's lips lingered, a reminder of lines she shouldn't cross. This was meant to be an act - not whatever her thumping heart suggested it had become.

Movement caught her eye. The photographer had abandoned his hiding spot in the bushes, now standing on the sidewalk several yards away. His camera hung from his neck as he checked through his shots, making sure he'd captured every angle of their encounter.

"Get in the car." Vanessa's voice came out rougher than intended. She opened the passenger door, grateful for the excuse to put space between them.

Kate slipped into the leather seat without argument. The sound of the door closing echoed in the quiet street.

Vanessa rounded the hood of her car, aware of the photographer's presence. Her hands trembled as she gripped the steering wheel. The engine purred to life, and she pulled away from the curb.

In her rearview mirror, she watched the photographer sprint toward his parked car. His camera bounced against his chest as he ran, no doubt eager to be the first to break this story.

The street lights cast alternating shadows across Kate's face as they drove. Vanessa's grip tightened on the wheel. She focused on the road ahead, because looking at Kate right now would force her to acknowledge what had happened back there and what it meant.

6

Kate's mind raced as she tried to make sense of the events that had unfolded. She had always admired Vanessa from afar, but never in her wildest dreams did she think she would end up sharing a passionate kiss with her.

Her heart still pounded in her chest as she sat down on Vanessa's sofa, trying to calm

herself down. She barely had time to process the kiss that she'd been crazy enough to initiate, for appearances sake, never mind the kiss that Vanessa had started before they'd gotten into Vanessa's car. That had completely taken her by surprise.

Kate couldn't help but replay those moments in her mind. The way Vanessa had looked at her, the way their lips had met, and the electric energy that had coursed through her body. The way Vanessa had taken control, pinning her against the car door... It was all so surreal.

She knew that they'd just been putting on a show for that photographer, but it was hard for Kate to remember that after the way that Vanessa had kissed her.

Kate closed her eyes for a second, trying to steady her heart rate. Up until this point, she'd just been focused on getting to safety. She couldn't think about the kiss when they were being aggressively chased. She couldn't think about anything other than getting to safety.

"Hold on," Vanessa had said, her voice surprisingly steady as she accelerated through a yellow light. The car's engine roared as they weaved through traffic, taking sharp turns down side streets Kate hadn't known existed.

Kate couldn't tell her that she lived only ten minutes away from the restaurant, because she knew that Vanessa would want to get back here, to the safety of her own home.

And even though she was safe in Vanessa's living room, Kate's hands still trembled. She'd seen paparazzi encounters in movies, but experiencing one firsthand had been terrifying. Her heart rate was only now returning to normal.

The reality of her new life hit her. This would become her normal too. Photographers hiding in bushes, car chases through the city, every moment of intimacy potentially

captured and splashed across tabloid pages. Kate's chest tightened at the thought.

Vanessa's heels clicked against the hardwood floor as she entered the living room, her phone illuminating her face. "He's still out there. Sitting in his car at the end of the driveway."

Kate's shoulders tensed. The photographer's persistence made this all too real, although thankfully, Vanessa's home was secure. The driveway was long and windy and the tall electronic gates at the foot of it would mean there was no chance of him making it any further.

"I need a drink. Would you like one?" Vanessa's composed voice cut through Kate's spiraling thoughts.

"I'll have whatever you're having." Kate watched as Vanessa left the room.

Kate stared at the pristine white walls of Vanessa's living room, her mind drifting to tomorrow's headlines. The photos would be everywhere. Splashed across gossip sites, social media, and tabloid covers. Their kiss in that alley would be the top entertainment story of the day, dissected and analyzed by millions. Their kisses. Kate swallowed. Those two moments would be all over the internet tomorrow.

Her throat tightened. But this was exactly what they'd planned. What Elliot had wanted for Vanessa. Yes, the timeline had just been accelerated, but it was what they'd wanted.

And yet...

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

The memory of Vanessa's lips against hers, the way her hands had gripped Kate's waist... None of that had felt manufactured. Kate's skin tingled at the memory of her touch.

But she couldn't let herself get lost in those thoughts. This arrangement wasn't about her growing attraction to Vanessa. It was about taking control of her own story. After years of dodging questions about her dating life and carefully monitoring every word she said in interviews, she would finally be free. No more vague answers about "the right person." No more attending events with male co-stars to generate buzz. No more lying.

Kate ran her fingers through her hair, trying to ground herself in the present moment. By this time tomorrow, everyone would know, and she'd finally be living her truth.

Her gaze drifted to the doorway where Vanessa had disappeared. The sound of ice clinking against glass drifted from the kitchen.

Vanessa returned, two crystal tumblers in hand, amber liquid catching the warm light from the table lamps. She extended one to Kate. Their fingers brushed during the exchange, sending a current through Kate's arm.

"Thank you." Kate lifted the glass to her lips, the whiskey's warmth spreading across her tongue.

As Kate sipped her drink, Vanessa wandered over to the large glass windows overlooking the city, her posture relaxed yet somehow still exuding an aura of tension. "Well, that should give the tabloids something to talk about for a while." Her voice

was casual, as if she were commenting on the weather rather than their intense encounter.

Kate's throat constricted. That kiss—those kisses—had been anything but casual for her. She took another sip of her drink, welcoming the burn as it slid down her throat. She could still feel Vanessa's hands on her body, still taste her lips. But Vanessa seemed completely unaffected by it all. Unmoved.

"Elliot will be pleased," Vanessa continued, turning back towards Kate with a slight smile. "We certainly delivered."

Her words landed like a bucket of cold water on Kate's simmering thoughts. She suddenly felt foolish, realizing that for Vanessa, their kisses had been nothing more than a business transaction. A means to an end.

Kate's stomach twisted. This was a job for Vanessa. She had to remind herself of that. The passionate, all-consuming moment in the alley was just another performance for her. One that Kate had agreed to.

Kate berated herself inwardly for getting carried away, for thinking there could be something more between them. Her shoulders stiffened as she kept her gaze on Vanessa, searching for any hint of something beyond professional distance in her eyes. But Vanessa remained composed, her face illuminated by the warm glow of the lamps, her expression inscrutable.

"We did." Kate forced a tight smile, her voice unwavering despite the lump in her throat. She took another sip of her drink, relishing the burn that washed away the taste of Vanessa's lips from her mouth. She wouldn't let herself think about how soft they'd been. "I imagine Elliot will want to have another meeting. You know, adjust the timeline."

Vanessa inclined her head, her eyes holding a glint of amusement. “He definitely will. He’s not used to having someone else call the shots.” She settled into an armchair across from her. “We’ll still want to keep things believable without being too... dramatic.”

Too dramatic. Like pinning someone against a car and kissing them senseless? Kate pushed the thought away. That had just been Vanessa ensuring the photographer got the perfect shot, nothing more.

“Right.” Kate cleared her throat, embracing the role of professional actress discussing scene parameters.

Kate watched as Vanessa lifted the crystal tumbler to her lips, taking a slow, deliberate sip. The amber liquid caught the light, creating tiny prisms that danced across Vanessa’s throat as she swallowed.

The silence stretched between them for a few seconds while Vanessa’s eyes traced over Kate’s features, her gaze thoughtful and penetrating. Kate’s skin prickled under the intensity of her scrutiny.

“Are you happy?” Vanessa’s question pierced the quiet. “By this time tomorrow, the whole world will know you’re not straight.”

Kate tried to keep her expression neutral, but inside, her emotions were all over the place. She wanted to be happy about her impending freedom, but the events of the night kept replaying in her mind, blurring the lines between their arrangement and her true feelings.

“I am.” Her voice was steady, but her heart hammered in her chest. “I wanted to come out on my own terms, and this—” She gestured between them, warming to the topic as she continued, “—this solves my problem too. So yes, I’m happy about that.”

Kate took another sip of her drink, welcoming the burn as the whiskey slid down her throat. She was determined to focus on the positives. Tomorrow, she would wake up to headlines about her and Vanessa, and she would be out to the entire world.

As Kate set her glass down, Vanessa's eyes remained locked on hers, as if searching for something beneath the surface. "Listen, Kate. I want to apologize."

Kate's muscles tensed. Was Vanessa rethinking this?

"Tomorrow, your problem will be solved. One day of headlines and it's done. But my... situation." Vanessa paused, her fingers trailing along the rim of her glass. "That's going to take longer to fix. The headlines about Lauren and Ruby won't disappear overnight."

The knot in Kate's chest loosened slightly. This wasn't about the kiss at all.

"I know you agreed to this arrangement, but I just want to say that you're giving more than you're getting." Vanessa's gaze met Kate's, earnest and direct. "You'll have to keep up appearances with me for weeks, maybe months, just to help salvage my image. I want you to know how grateful I am for that."

Kate's throat tightened. If Vanessa only knew that spending time with her wasn't a hardship at all. That pretending to be attracted to her wouldn't require any acting on Kate's part.

"You don't need to thank me," Kate managed. "We're helping each other. Being seen with you, for however long, helps me too. That wasn't just some drunken kiss. This is real." Kate blinked before she cleared her throat. "I mean, people will think this is real."

Kate's heart sank at how easily Vanessa discussed their arrangement, but then she

caught something in the older woman's expression. A slight tremor in her fingers as she set down her glass. The way her gaze dropped to Kate's lips for the briefest moment before darting away.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“Real.” Vanessa repeated the word, her voice dropping lower. “You know, you were very convincing back there.”

The air between them crackled with unspoken tension. Kate’s skin tingled as Vanessa’s eyes met hers again, this time with an intensity that made her breath catch. There was something different in her gaze now. A flicker of vulnerability that hadn’t been there before.

“So were you,” Kate said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Vanessa stood and walked towards the kitchen, her tumbler empty now, but Kate didn’t think that was the only reason she was leaving the room. The weight of their conversation seemed to hang heavy in the air, stifling the space between them.

As Vanessa’s footsteps faded, Kate let out a slow breath. She rose from the sofa, needing to move, and wandered towards the windows, drawn to the dazzling view of the city skyline. She focused on the bright lights in the distance. In the reflection of the glass, she caught a glimpse of Vanessa returning with the bottle of whiskey. Kate turned, looking over her shoulder, just as Vanessa lifted her eyes to meet Kate’s in the reflection.

Their eyes locked, and for a fleeting moment, something passed between them. Kate saw it in the subtle softening of Vanessa’s features, the way her eyes warmed with a hint of unspoken understanding. Or perhaps it was something Kate wanted to see.

As quickly as it happened, the moment was gone. Vanessa blinked, the flicker of vulnerability vanishing, and her expression closed off once more.

She refilled Kate's glass, their fingers brushing again as Vanessa handed it to her.

Vanessa pulled out her phone again. "He's still parked out there." Her thumb swiped across the screen as she cycled through different camera views. "You should stay here tonight," Vanessa said as she looked up. "It would look strange if you left now anyway." She set her phone on the coffee table, face down. "There's a guest room at the top of the stairs. First door on the left."

Of course, it made sense. What new couple wouldn't spend the night together after such a public display of affection? If that photographer was still there in the morning, he'd get another shot of them leaving together too.

"That's probably smart." Kate gripped her glass tighter, hoping her voice wouldn't betray the flutter in her chest. "I don't have anything with me though."

"I can lend you something to sleep in." Vanessa's eyes left hers as she sat down again. "And there's a new toothbrush in the guest bathroom."

"Thank you." Kate looked away for a second. "For letting me stay." She searched Vanessa's face for any hint of reluctance, but found none.

"It's the least I can do after tonight." Vanessa held her gaze. "Are you okay?"

Kate nodded slowly. "Yes. Obviously shaken, but..." She trailed off. "I'm just glad you were driving, honestly. And that we made it here safely."

"I always used to have a driver, but over the years I've gotten out of the habit. I like the freedom of driving myself. Although it comes with its own risks." Vanessa's voice was steady, but her eyes held a hint of concern.

Kate took a deep breath. "There really wasn't time to say anything, but I live only ten

minutes away from the restaurant.”

Vanessa’s expression softened. “I’m sorry. I should’ve asked. And I’m sorry that it’s already gotten like this. I thought we’d have a few quiet weeks before any real paparazzi threats.”

Kate waved off the apology. “You don’t need to apologize. I knew what I was getting into.” Even as she said the words, she wasn’t sure if she believed them. Yes, she had agreed to the fake relationship, but she hadn’t anticipated the danger of it all. “And I was the one who decided to give that photographer something.”

“Still.” Vanessa’s voice was insistent. “I want to make it up to you. Starting with making sure you have proper security at your place. Unless you already have it?”

Kate shook her head. “I just have the very basics. I haven’t lived there that long and until now, I haven’t had a need for it.”

“Okay. I’ll have my security team do an assessment and get a solid system put in.”

“Thank you,” Kate said softly, feeling a mix of gratitude and apprehension.

Vanessa’s gaze held hers, and for a moment, Kate saw something other than the confident movie star she’d always admired. She saw a woman who had been hurt, who was still reeling from the betrayal of her partner, and who was now doing her best to pick up the pieces.

Vanessa nodded before she stood up. “I’ll go find you something to wear.”

Kate watched Vanessa disappear up the stairs to get her something to sleep in. The enormity of what lay ahead crashed over her. Weeks, maybe months of this, of being close to Vanessa while maintaining professional distance. Of pretending their touches

and glances meant nothing when they set her skin ablaze.

This arrangement had seemed so simple when Elliot first proposed it. A mutually beneficial solution to both their problems. But now, with the taste of Vanessa's lips still lingering on hers and a whole night ahead in the guest room just down the hall from her, Kate realized just how complicated things had become.

7

Vanessa wrapped her hands around the warm ceramic mug, staring out the kitchen window at the morning light streaming through the palm trees. The coffee's rich aroma filled her senses, grounding her in the present moment as her thoughts drifted upstairs.

The house maintained its usual morning quiet, but the energy had shifted. Someone else occupied her space. Someone whose kisses from the previous night lingered in her mind with startling clarity.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Her fingers brushed against her lower lip. That kiss in the alley... It had awakened something she thought long dormant. Something that had nothing to do with rehabbing her image.

Vanessa had done her best to act like she'd been unaffected by their kisses last night when they'd come back here, that it had been just another performance for her, but she'd hardly slept last night, knowing that that wasn't true.

She couldn't dismiss the way Kate's touch had set her skin ablaze, or the way her heart had thundered in her chest when their lips met.

Vanessa sighed, running a hand through her hair. This was not part of the plan. She had agreed to this charade to salvage her reputation, to regain control of the headlines. But now, with Kate just upstairs, Vanessa found herself grappling with feelings she had no right to entertain.

She needed to get a handle on this, to remember why she had agreed to this in the first place. Yet, even as Vanessa tried to convince herself that their plan was working, she couldn't shake the memory of Kate's fingers tracing the line of her jaw, or the way her breath had caught in her throat when Vanessa had pulled her closer.

Vanessa closed her eyes, willing the images to fade. This was not the time to get lost in the whirlwind of her own emotions. She had a reputation to salvage, a career to protect. Anything else was a distraction she couldn't afford.

She opened the security app on her phone, glad to see that the photographer hadn't come back. At some point between one and four o'clock this morning he'd left. But

now, she watched as Elliot's black Mercedes pulled up to her gate and punched in the code. Her agent never showed up unannounced, not in more than twenty years of working together.

"Here we go," she whispered, placing her mug on the counter.

The security monitor on the wall displayed Elliot parking behind her car. He wore an impeccably tailored navy suit, his silver hair catching the morning light.

Vanessa glanced down at her black silk robe and bare feet. There was no time to change. The sound of Elliot's car door echoed through the quiet morning. She padded to her front door and reached for the handle just as Elliot raised his hand to knock.

"You're here early." She opened the door wide, studying his expression.

Elliot stood on her doorstep, newspapers and magazines tucked under one arm and his phone in his other hand. His perfectly groomed eyebrows arched high on his forehead, a gleam in his eyes that she recognized from countless publicity campaigns over the years.

"Darling, have you seen the headlines?" He stepped past her into the foyer, his designer shoes clicking against the floor.

Vanessa followed Elliot into her kitchen, where he laid out an array of tabloids and magazines across her pristine marble counter. The glossy pages captured every moment of last night in vivid detail.

She forgot to breathe as she took in the first image. There she was, with pressing Kate her against the wall. The streetlight had cast a golden glow across Kate's face, her lips parted, eyes half-closed. The raw intimacy of the moment struck her.

“These are absolutely perfect.” Elliot spread out more tabloids. “The lighting, the composition, the chemistry-”

Vanessa barely heard him. Her fingers hovered over another shot. This one showed Kate pulling her closer, their bodies melding together. The image transported her back to that moment, to the heat of Kate’s breath against her neck, the softness of her lips.

“Look at this one,” Elliot tapped a close-up. “The way she’s looking at you...”

Vanessa’s stomach tightened. In the photo, Kate gazed at her with such open vulnerability it made her chest ache. She remembered that exact moment. That was when the line between performance and reality had blurred beyond recognition for her.

The headlines screamed across the pages: “VANESSA’S NEW LOVE,” “HOLLYWOOD’S HOTTEST NEW COUPLE,” “PRESCOTT MOVES ON.” But these words felt hollow compared to the truth captured in those images. The passion. The hunger.

“Vanessa?” Elliot’s voice cut through her thoughts. “Are you alright?”

She pulled her gaze away from the photos, forcing herself to look at her agent. “Yes, I just...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes drifted back to the images spread before her.

Footsteps on the stairs pulled Vanessa’s attention from the photographs. Kate descended, wearing the same white pants and teal blouse from last night, her hair tousled from sleep.

Kate paused at the kitchen entrance, her eyes widening at the sight of Elliot. “Oh, hi.”

Vanessa's throat went dry. The tabloids scattered across her counter told one story, but the reality of their night apart in separate rooms painted another. She caught the slight darkening of Elliot's expression as his gaze darted between them, his lips curling into a knowing smile.

Kate's gaze drifted across Vanessa's silk robe, lingering at the exposed skin of her collarbone.

Vanessa's breath caught in her throat. The air between them crackled with an electric tension. Kate's eyes traveled up, meeting Vanessa's with an intensity that transported her back to the alley, to passionate kisses and desperate touches.

"Well, well." Elliot straightened his tie. "I see our little plan worked better than expected."

"It's not-" Vanessa started, but the words died in her throat as Kate stepped closer, her presence magnetic, and Vanessa's mind flashed to their heated kisses with her back against the wall in that alley.

Elliot's eyebrows rose higher as he observed their loaded silence. His assumption was written across his face, that the passion captured in those photographs had led to something more, that Kate's presence this morning meant exactly what it appeared to mean.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

But Vanessa didn't correct him, the words caught in her throat. She needed to explain that Kate had slept in the guest room, that they really had been acting in those photos, or at least Kate had been.

Hadn't she?

Vanessa pulled her robe tighter, her fingertips pressing against the cool marble counter as she faced Elliot.

"TMZ's already running with it." Elliot held up his phone, his face alight with excitement. "'Kate Monroe Comes Out: Rising Star's Steamy Night with Hollywood Icon.' The comments are through the roof."

Kate shifted beside her, and Vanessa fought the urge to turn to see her expression.

"'Hollywood's New Power Couple: Kate Monroe Steps Out of the Closet and Into Vanessa Prescott's Arms,'" Elliot read from his phone screen, his voice carrying the practiced cadence of a seasoned publicist.

Vanessa's attention split between his words and Kate's proximity. She'd moved closer to examine the headlines, her arm brushing against Vanessa's silk robe. The memory of Kate's fingers gripping her back filled her mind.

A wave of protectiveness washed through Vanessa. This was Kate's moment, her coming out story being splashed across every entertainment outlet. She stole a glance at Kate, searching for signs of distress or regret, but found only a quiet determination in her expression.

“The chemistry between the two actresses was undeniable,” Elliot’s voice took on a theatrical flair.

Vanessa’s fingers pressed harder against the cool marble counter. Electric barely scratched the surface of what she’d felt in that alley. The way Kate had responded to her touch, the soft gasp against her lips.

Elliot slipped his phone into his jacket pocket. His eyes danced between Vanessa and Kate, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“I must say, this went far better than we’d planned.” He gestured to the tabloids spread across the counter. “The raw passion here... You can’t manufacture that kind of chemistry. And staying the night?” Elliot raised an eyebrow, his smile widening. “Remind me to add ‘celebrity matchmaker’ to my resume.” He winked at them both. “My commission on this pairing will be substantial, by the way.”

“Elliot.” Vanessa’s voice cut through his enthusiasm. “Nothing happened last night.”

Elliot’s perfectly manicured eyebrows shot up toward his hairline. He glanced between them, taking in Kate’s wrinkled clothes from the night before and Vanessa’s silk robe.

“You expect me to believe-” He waved his hand at the photographs scattered across her counter. “After these? Please.”

Heat crept up Vanessa’s neck. The images taunted her. The way her hands had tangled in Kate’s hair, the press of their bodies against the car. She forced her gaze away from a particularly intimate shot.

“Kate slept in the guest room. The photographer followed us back here last night. We couldn’t risk Kate being seen leaving. Plus, it wasn’t safe.” The words came out

sharper than intended. “We maintained appearances for the photographer, nothing more.”

Kate shifted beside her, and Vanessa caught the slight downturn of her lips. Something twisted in Vanessa’s chest, a mixture of guilt and longing she hadn’t expected.

“The guest room.” Elliot’s voice dripped with skepticism. He picked up one of the tabloids, the one with the huge photo where Kate’s fingers trailed along her jaw, their lips a breath apart. “This doesn’t look like maintaining appearances, darling. This looks like-”

“It was acting,” Vanessa cut him off, though the lie burned her throat. She remembered the softness of Kate’s lips, the heat that had spread through her entire body. “We did exactly what you wanted. We created a convincing story for the press. It just happened faster than we’d intended.”

Elliot’s eyes narrowed as he studied her face. In twenty years, he’d learned to read through her careful masks, to spot the moments when she held back. His gaze flickered to Kate, then back to Vanessa.

“If you say so.” His tone made it clear he didn’t believe a word. “Though I must say, if this is acting-” He tapped the photo. “You both deserve Oscars.”

8

Kate listened, her eyes flicking between Elliot and Vanessa as he outlined his strategy. The photos from last night had already gone viral, and now Elliot was in full publicist mode. Every instinct in her body urged her to tell Elliot to slow down, but her gaze kept drifting back to Vanessa.

“We lean into this,” Elliot was saying. “We give them a story. An exclusive. Something that spins this from what could be a one-night stand into a fairytale romance.”

Kate glanced at Vanessa, but her expression was completely neutral.

“I’ll set up a photoshoot,” Elliot continued, his enthusiasm growing. “Something glamorous, something classy.”

“Lauren and Ruby were stumbling out of clubs, sneaking around.” Elliot waved his hand dismissively. “Absolutely no class. But they spun it perfectly. Ruby dodged the homewrecker label, and Lauren?” He scoffed. “She’s found true love instead of being called out as a cheater.”

Kate stole another glance at Vanessa. A muscle twitched in her jaw.

“We need this to be different.” Elliot paced the kitchen. “Those photos from last night?” He stopped for just a second to look at both of them. “That passion was perfect. But an alley? Up against a car?” He shook his head as he started moving again. “We need less of the scandalous vibe and more romance. You two clearly have chemistry on camera. Now we just need to redirect it. Keep this momentum going, but make it...” His hands flourished in the air. “More sophisticated. More genuine.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Kate watched as Vanessa's composure cracked. Her lips pressed into a thin line, and she pushed back from the kitchen counter.

"I need to get dressed." Vanessa turned toward the stairs, her bare feet silent against the floor.

Kate was left alone with Elliot in the sun-drenched kitchen. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well?" His smile stretched wide. "How does it feel? You're officially out, darling. And what a splash you've made."

Kate's fingers drummed against the marble countertop. The weight of the moment pressed down on her, everything she'd wanted, wrapped in a package she hadn't expected.

"I mean, Vanessa Prescott?" Elliot leaned in close. "When I pitched this, I hoped for good publicity. But those photos?" He placed a hand over his heart. "The passion? The chemistry? It's beyond what I could have dreamed. You two look like you're actually-"

"Elliot." Kate cut him off.

"Right, right." He straightened his designer jacket. "But you're happy about this, aren't you? This is what you wanted. To come out on your own terms?"

Kate slid her phone out of her pocket and glanced at the screen. The notification

count had climbed past five hundred. Text messages, emails, social media mentions. Her Instagram following had jumped by forty thousand overnight.

“My terms would have been different.” Kate put her phone away. “I always thought I’d just post something.”

“A social media post?” Elliot’s nose wrinkled. “That’s so... pedestrian. This?” He gestured at the tabloid headlines. “This is memorable. This is a story people will talk about.”

“I wanted it to be simple.” Kate’s voice dropped. “Just... me. Being honest. Not this whole production.”

“Oh Kate, everything in this town is a production.” Elliot gave her a sad smile. “And you’re center stage now. It’s perfect.”

Perfect wasn’t the word Kate would use. Complex? Messy? Real. It had felt real despite everything about it being fake. The memory of Vanessa’s lips against hers hadn’t faded. Neither had the way Vanessa’s fingers had gripped her waist, pulling her closer in that alley. None of that had been fake, not for her anyway.

“You should be happy.” Elliot’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “There are worse ways to come out than letting the world think you’re dating Vanessa Prescott.”

Kate bit the inside of her cheek.

“She’s the most sought-after woman in Hollywood right now.” Elliot gathered up the tabloids into a neat stack. “Every lesbian’s dream. Hell, every straight woman’s dream too. The amount of DMs she’s gotten since Lauren-” He stopped himself. “Well, let’s just say you’ve skipped the line, darling.”

The memory of Vanessa's fingers threading through her hair, the heat of her breath against Kate's lips, flooded back. Kate pushed it away.

"Look at you, all serious." Elliot reached over and squeezed her shoulder. "This is good news. The press loves you two together. The photos are stunning. And Vanessa?" He glanced toward the stairs. "She needs this just as much as you do. Trust me. She needs to forget about Lauren, and you're going to help her do that. After this fake relationship runs its course... I'm thinking two months, maybe three. Then you two will have the most civilized break up Hollywood has ever seen. No drama, no scandal. Just two successful women who realized they work better as friends. And then Vanessa should be ready to put herself out there again."

Kate stared blankly at the tabloid headlines, her stomach churning with a mix of dread and jealousy. The thought of Vanessa dating someone else made her feel sick. She barely heard Elliot's words as he rambled on about the benefits of their fake relationship and how it would be good for both of them.

Her mind drifted back to the alleyway, to the way Vanessa's lips had felt against hers, the way her fingers had dug into Kate's waist.

How had she let this happen? Why had she agreed to this?

Elliot's voice pulled her away from her thoughts. "Everyone wins here. You get your coming out story, Vanessa gets her redemption arc, and the public gets their new power couple."

The click of heels made Kate turn. Vanessa came into the kitchen in a cream silk blouse tucked into high-waisted black slacks that accentuated her long legs. Her dark hair was swept up in an elegant twist, exposing the graceful line of her neck. A few loose strands framed her face, softening the polished look.

Kate's mouth went dry. Even in casual home attire, Vanessa commanded attention with the way she carried herself, the subtle power in each step. The morning light streaming through the windows caught the delicate gold chain around her neck, drawing Kate's eyes to her collarbone.

"So, Elliot," Vanessa said as she joined them again. "What's our next move?"

The question hung in the air as Kate tried to tear her gaze away from Vanessa's hazel brown eyes, from the slight shimmer of her nude lipstick, from the sharp angles of her jawline. Every detail about her was a study in elegance and restraint.

Everything Kate wasn't feeling right now.

9

Vanessa leaned against the bar, watching Kate across the room. Their performance at the award show had been impeccable. The gentle touches, the shared glances, the way Kate's hand had rested on her lower back as they walked the red carpet. The cameras devoured every moment.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“Another gin and tonic?” The bartender raised his eyebrows.

“Please.”

Kate was across the room, surrounded by a group of young actors. Her presence commanded attention, drawing others into her orbit with an effortless charm.

The bartender slid the fresh drink across the polished wood. Vanessa lifted it to her lips, ice clinking against glass. She’d attended countless after-parties in this very room, but tonight felt different. The air hummed with an electric charge she couldn’t shake.

Kate’s laugh carried across the space, musical and genuine. Their eyes met briefly through the crowd. Kate’s smile softened before she returned to her conversation.

The evening had been exhausting. The hours of interviews, photographers shouting their names, entertainment reporters fishing for intimate details about their relationship. Vanessa had answered each question with practiced grace, being vague yet confident in her answers. Yet every time Kate’s fingers intertwined with hers, every shared whisper and gentle smile felt increasingly real.

Vanessa knew she should pull her gaze away, but she found herself transfixed, unable to look elsewhere. She sipped her drink, the crisp bite of gin cooling the rising heat in her chest. It was foolish, this undeniable pull she felt toward Kate.

This arrangement was meant to be temporary, a strategic move to salvage her public image after Lauren’s betrayal. And yet, as she watched Kate, the way her eyes

sparkled with life, Vanessa felt a deep yearning that caught her off guard.

“You two look great together.”

Vanessa turned to find Evelyn Coleman at her side, a smile on her lips.

Vanessa felt a warm flush creep up her neck at Evelyn’s comment. She quickly looked away from Kate, focusing instead on the iconic actress standing beside her.

“Congratulations on your win,” Vanessa said.

“Thank you.” Evelyn turned to order a drink and a few moments later she was sipping her glass of champagne.

Vanessa studied Evelyn’s profile, weighing the prospect of confiding in her. They’d known each other for decades, shared countless late-night conversations.

“Why didn’t you answer my calls?” Evelyn asked. “I was worried about you.”

“I wasn’t... I wasn’t ready to talk about it. About any of it.”

Evelyn met her gaze. “I was worried about you.”

The genuine concern in Evelyn’s voice made Vanessa’s chest ache. She glanced at Kate again, still deep in conversation across the room. The urge to reveal their arrangement intensified.

“What was Lauren thinking?” Evelyn shook her head. “You were the best thing that ever happened to her.”

The words struck deeper than Vanessa expected. She gripped her glass tighter. Ten

years of memories threatened to surface. The holidays in the south of France, quiet mornings sharing coffee and scripts, building a life together piece by piece. All shattered.

“I keep wondering if there were signs I missed.” The admission slipped past Vanessa’s lips before she could stop it.

“Don’t do that to yourself.” Evelyn’s voice carried the weight of experience. “Lauren made her choice. She threw away something precious for a fling with someone half her age.” A wry laugh escaped Evelyn’s lips. “Though I suppose I’m not one to talk. My wife’s eighteen years younger than me. Anyway, enough about me. How did you two meet?” Evelyn’s eyes sparkled with interest. “I want the real story.”

The question knocked the air from Vanessa’s lungs. On the red carpet, the lies had rolled off her tongue with practiced ease: a chance meeting at an industry event, an invitation to dinner, an instant connection. But lying to Evelyn wasn’t as easy.

“Kate and I...” She paused, the weight of truth and lies tangling on her tongue. Across the room, Kate caught her eye again. Something in that gaze made Vanessa’s heart stumble. “I wasn’t looking for this.” The confession emerged as barely more than a whisper. “After Lauren, I thought...”

“That you were done?” Evelyn’s hand settled on her arm. “Life has a way of surprising us, especially when we’re not looking for it.”

Vanessa watched as Kate excused herself from her group and started moving through the crowd toward them. Each step closer made Vanessa’s pulse quicken, her skin prickling with awareness.

Evelyn continued. “There’s an old Irish proverb that I love. What’s meant for you won’t pass you by.”

Vanessa swallowed, her throat tight as Kate glided through the crowd, Evelyn's words echoing in her mind. As she walked, the black evening gown clung to Kate's curves, the slit revealing tantalizing glimpses of leg with each step.

"Ms. Coleman, it's an honor." Kate's voice carried that hint of awe she reserved for industry veterans.

"Please, call me Evelyn." A knowing smile played at the corners of Evelyn's mouth. "I was just telling Vanessa how lovely you two look together."

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

The warmth of Kate's body pressed against Vanessa's side sent sparks dancing across her skin. The gentle pressure of Kate's arm sliding around her waist felt both foreign and achingly familiar. This wasn't part of the plan. None of this had been part of the plan.

"Thank you." Kate's fingers curved against Vanessa's hip, anchoring them together. "Though I still can't believe it. It was completely unexpected."

Evelyn's knowing smile only intensified the ache spreading beneath Vanessa's ribs.

What's meant for you won't pass you by.

But this wasn't meant for her.

This was meant for the cameras, for the headlines, for salvaging her reputation.

10

Kate leaned against the bar's polished mahogany, her fingertips playing with the stem of her wine glass. A group of actors surrounded her, mostly people she'd worked with, but her attention drifted across the room.

Through the sea of designer gowns and tuxedos, she caught fragments of Vanessa's silhouette. She stood among a group of industry veterans, her presence commanding even from a distance. The way she tilted her head when she listened, the subtle arch of her eyebrow when something amused her. Kate had memorized these small gestures throughout the evening.

“...don’t you think, Kate?”

The question snapped her focus back to the conversation. “Sorry, what was that?”

Her co-star from her latest film repeated his question about their upcoming project, but Kate’s gaze wandered again. This time, she met Vanessa’s eyes directly. The connection lasted only seconds before Vanessa turned back to her conversation, but it left Kate’s skin tingling.

An hour had passed since they’d last spoken. Vanessa had been chatting with Evelyn Coleman when Kate had felt the weight of Vanessa’s gaze from across the room.

It was almost imperceptible, but Kate noticed, and she had guessed it was a silent invitation to join them. She had been wanting to meet Evelyn, an actress she’d always admired. She just had to figure out how to keep her nerves in check.

As Kate had made her way through the crowd, her heart had started to race. She told herself it was the thrill of interacting with a Hollywood legend, but she knew it was more than that. Being near Vanessa always seemed to leave her feeling slightly off-kilter.

She had grown accustomed to Vanessa’s gaze throughout the night, but this time, it felt different. More intense, perhaps. Or was she imagining things? After all, Vanessa was acting. It was only natural that she would look at her from across the room.

Kate remembered the moment with crystal clarity, approaching Evelyn Coleman in what had felt like slow motion. She’d spent years watching Evelyn’s films, studying her technique, dreaming of working with her someday. When she came out just a few years ago, Kate couldn’t believe it.

Standing there, with Vanessa beside her, it all felt a little surreal, like this couldn’t

possibly be her life. The words “Ms. Coleman” had tumbled from her lips, her voice carrying that reverent tone she couldn’t quite suppress. When Evelyn insisted on first names, Kate’s stomach did a small flip. Here she was, standing beside two of Hollywood’s most accomplished actresses, and one of them, as far as the public was concerned was her girlfriend.

But it was Evelyn’s comment about how well she and Vanessa looked together that had sent Kate’s mind spinning. Without thinking, she’d pressed closer to Vanessa, her arm finding its way around Vanessa’s waist. The contact had been electric. Kate remembered how solid and warm Vanessa felt against her, how natural it seemed to curve her fingers against Vanessa’s hip.

The words she’d spoken, about not believing it, about it being unexpected, had carried more truth than Evelyn Coleman could have known. The way Kate’s body responded to Vanessa’s proximity, the flutter in her chest when their eyes met, none of that had been a performance.

In that moment, surrounded by the glittering crowd of Hollywood’s elite, Kate had felt both powerful and terrifyingly vulnerable. Her fingers had trembled slightly where they rested against Vanessa’s dress, and she’d prayed no one would notice how her heart had stuttered when Vanessa leaned into her touch.

Kate lifted her glass to her lips now, using the motion to steal another look at Vanessa from across the room. Vanessa’s midnight blue dress caught the light as she shifted her weight, the fabric hugging her curves. Their eyes met again, and this time Vanessa held her gaze for a second longer.

Kate noticed the shift in Vanessa’s posture, how her body had tensed ever so slightly. Following Vanessa’s line of sight, Kate spotted Lauren across the room, radiant in a red dress that drew every eye as she entered the room. Vanessa and Lauren’s gazes had locked, an invisible current of history crackling between them.

Kate set her glass down and moved through the crowd. Her steps quickened as Lauren's presence cast a shadow across the room. The faces around her blurred - actors, directors, producers - none of them mattered. Her focus remained on Vanessa.

She slipped between conversations, offering quick smiles and half-formed apologies as she navigated the space. She reached Vanessa's side and placed her palm against the small of her back. The fabric of Vanessa's dress was cool beneath her touch, but she felt the heat of Vanessa's skin through the thin material.

"Sorry to interrupt." Kate addressed the small group around them with practiced charm. "Would you mind if I borrowed her for a moment?"

Vanessa's body relaxed slightly under Kate's touch as they moved away from the crowd. Kate guided them toward a quieter part of the room.

"Thank you," Vanessa whispered, her voice barely audible above the party's hum. The careful mask she wore for the cameras slipped just enough for Kate to glimpse the vulnerability beneath.

Vanessa downed what was left of her drink. "I knew she'd be here. I just-"

"Look at me." Kate angled her body to block Lauren from view. "What do you want to do?"

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Vanessa met her gaze, her eyes flicking briefly toward the glass in her hand before returning to Kate's. "What do I want to do? I want to throw this glass at her head." Vanessa's voice was low, her eyes fixed on some point over Kate's shoulder. Vanessa took a breath, her chest rising and falling in a slow, measured rhythm. "But I can't do that. I won't give her the satisfaction."

Kate waited, her own breath catching somewhere in her throat. She knew why Vanessa wanted this fake relationship, to get back at her ex, to create her own headlines, but this was the first time that Kate had witnessed any real emotion from Vanessa when it came to her ex.

"I have no feelings for her. Not anymore. Not after everything." Vanessa's jaw tightened. "But I hate her for what she did. For how she did it. She could have just left me instead of sneaking around and getting caught. Because it was only a matter of time before she got caught. A camera is never too far away from either of them. But she did it anyway."

Vanessa's eyes met Kate's again, and this time the vulnerability was unguarded.

"Let's get you another drink." Kate's voice was gentle. "And then we'll figure out what you want to do."

11

The bartender placed a fresh gin and tonic before her, condensation beading on the glass. She lifted it, ice cubes clinking. Vanessa took a long drink as Lauren's laughter echoed across the room.

Kate's arm slipped around her waist. "You okay?" Kate's breath brushed against her ear.

The touch sent electricity down Vanessa's spine. Her closed her eyes for a second, willing herself not to feel anything, but her body betrayed her, melting into Kate's embrace.

"I'm fine." The words came out rougher than intended.

Lauren appeared in her peripheral vision, chatting with a group of actors and producers.

Kate guided them toward the doors to the terrace, her hand finding Vanessa's, their fingers intertwining. The contact felt too natural, too right. This was supposed to be an act, but Vanessa found herself wishing for just a second that she could be with someone like Kate, someone who respected her, who cared about her feelings, who had kissed her like Kate had. Vanessa swallowed. Kate's protective instincts, the way she positioned herself between Vanessa and Lauren's line of sight, it sent awarmth through Vanessa's body that she hadn't felt in a long time.

Vanessa's gaze dropped to their joined hands. Kate's thumb traced over her knuckles, the simple touch igniting sparks she couldn't ignore. She'd spent decades mastering control over her emotions, yet here she was, coming undone by the smallest gestures.

"What do you want to do?" Kate asked softly, glancing around her to make sure that no one could overhear their conversation.

"We could leave." The words slipped out before she could stop them. She took a sip, the bite of gin steadying her nerves. "I mean, we've made our appearance."

"Is that what you want?" Kate's question held no judgment, just quiet understanding.

Vanessa stared into her drink. The truth was, she didn't know what she wanted anymore. When she looked up she noticed Kate's eyes narrow slightly as her gaze fixed on something over Vanessa's shoulder.

"She's heading this way," Kate murmured.

Vanessa took a deep breath, steeling herself. "I need you to look at me like I'm the love of your life." She paused, meeting Kate's gaze. "I mean it. Really sell it. This isn't for some staged photo op. This is Lauren. She knows me better than anyone."

A subtle change came over Kate's expression, a hint of uncertainty or surprise, but it was gone before Vanessa could decipher it.

Kate held her gaze as if she was silently accepting Vanessa's challenge. This was the moment when the truth of their situation would become evident, when the boundaries of this fake relationship would be tested.

"Okay." Kate leaned closer, her voice lowering. "You don't owe her anything. Alright?"

Vanessa nodded, and Kate smoothly segued into a new topic, asking Vanessa if she wanted to get away next weekend, that she knew of the perfect place.

And then Vanessa became aware of Lauren's presence. She imagined she could sense Lauren's eyes on them, searching for answers, maybe even wondering if Vanessa had cheated on her with Kate.

"Vanessa," Lauren said. "I'm glad I caught you."

Vanessa held her breath as she turned, steeling herself for whatever was to come. Lauren's eyes flicked to Kate, taking in their joined hands, their closeness. For a

moment, Vanessa saw a flicker of something in Lauren's eye, an emotion she couldn't quite read. Was it hurt? Surprise? Jealously?

Then, Lauren's gaze shifted back to her, and the mask of composure slipped effortlessly back into place. "I wanted to talk, clear the air."

Vanessa felt Kate's body stiffen beside her. "Now?" She couldn't keep the edge of irritation from her voice.

Lauren's eyes narrowed slightly. "I understand if you don't want to?—"

"What is it you want to clear exactly? You cheated. Multiple times. And the whole world knows about it. My name's been splashed across every tabloid because of your affair."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Lauren's perfect eyebrows arched. "Oh? And what would you call these recent headlines?" Her gaze cut to Kate, sharp as a blade. "Didn't take you long, did it?"

"You want to do this here?" She lifted her chin. "Fine. But let's be clear, you checked out of our relationship long before the photos with Ruby hit the press."

Lauren scoffed. "That's not-"

"We should have ended this months ago. Maybe even years." The words tasted like acid on Vanessa's tongue. "I just wish you had the decency to say something. To tell me you weren't happy anymore. Instead, I had to find out with the rest of the world that you were seeing someone else." She shook her head. "Do you know what that felt like? Seeing those photos?"

Lauren's perfect composure cracked, just for a moment.

Vanessa steadied her breathing. The familiar ache of betrayal threatened to overwhelm her, but she refused to give Lauren the satisfaction of seeing her pain.

"The air is cleared, Lauren. You made your choice." Vanessa glanced at Kate. "And I've made mine."

Ten years of memories flashed through her mind.

How had she missed the signs? The last year had been full of them. The late nights, the canceled plans, the growing distance. She'd thought it was due to their busy schedules, to the natural ebb and flow of a long-term relationship, but the truth had

been far simpler, and far more devastating.

Kate stepped forward, her voice carrying a quiet authority. “I think you should leave now. You’ve said what you came to say.”

Lauren’s mouth opened, then closed. For once, she seemed at a loss for words.

Vanessa watched as Lauren’s back disappeared into the crowd, the contact of Kate’s fingers laced with hers grounding her. She became aware of the hum of the room around them: the clinking of glasses, the low hum of conversations, the laughter. It was like the world had started moving again after pausing for their tense exchange. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling Kate’s steady presence by her side.

Kate studied her. “You okay?”

Vanessa nodded, squeezing Kate’s hand. She wasn’t sure what she was feeling—relief, regret, anger. It was a mess of emotions swirling inside her.

She took another sip of her drink, realizing her hand was shaking slightly. She searched Kate’s eyes for any sign of judgment, but found only understanding and concern. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Kate tugged at her hand. “Let’s get some air. The terrace should be quiet.”

Vanessa followed Kate through the French doors onto the terrace, her legs unsteady. The chilly night breeze hit her face as they stepped outside, clearing some of the fog from her mind. String lights twinkled above, casting a soft glow across the empty terrace.

Kate released her hand and leaned against the railing. Vanessa missed the contact

immediately. She pressed her palms against the cool metal, focusing on the fact that she hadn't let Lauren see how much she'd hurt her.

The distant sound of traffic rose from below, mingling with the muted music and chatter from inside. Out here, away from prying eyes and expectations, Vanessa let herself relax a little, and the weight of Lauren's words, of their confrontation, began to lift.

Vanessa pressed her lips together. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

Kate turned toward her, and Vanessa caught the gentle concern in her eyes.

"This is what we agreed to, remember?"

"I know, but—"

"You were incredible in there. I don't know how you kept your composure." Kate's blue eyes searched her face. "If someone had hurt me like that, I wouldn't have been half as dignified."

Vanessa couldn't miss the genuine admiration in Kate's voice. "I'm not really sure how I did," she said with a lopsided smile.

Kate's eyes found hers in the dim light of the terrace. "Would you like to leave?"

"Yes." The word came easier than Vanessa expected.

Kate extended her hand, and Vanessa took it, their fingers sliding together. The contact steadied her, grounding her after the confrontation with Lauren. They stepped back inside, the warmth and noise enveloping them.

Kate guided them through the crowd with practiced ease. Vanessa kept her chin high, aware of the eyes following their progress across the room.

They wound their way past clusters of Hollywood elite, the faces blurring together. Vanessa focused on Kate's back, on the way her dress caught the light, on anything except the lingering echo of Lauren's words.

12

The silence hung thick between them, punctuated only by the purr of the engine and the occasional click of the turn signal. Vanessa's driver wasn't one for small talk.

Vanessa's profile caught the passing lights, her jaw tight, her gaze fixed on some distant point through the tinted window. The memory of their confrontation with Lauren lingered.

"Did you get that security system installed?" Vanessa's voice broke through the quiet.

"Yeah, I did. Thanks for organizing that. They got it all done yesterday."

"Good." Vanessa turned to look at her. She leaned closer, her breath warm against Kate's ear. "Give Matthew your address. Otherwise you're going to end up staying at mine again."

Kate's pulse quickened at Vanessa's proximity and her words. She cleared her throat and spoke toward the front of the car, giving Vanessa's driver the address for her town house in Santa Monica.

"Of course, Ms. Monroe."

Vanessa's hand found Kate's in the darkness between them, her grip firm yet gentle.

Kate glanced down at their joined hands, at how Vanessa's fingers fit perfectly

between hers. The warmth spread up her arm and settled in her chest. Such a small touch, yet it consumed her thoughts. Kate's thumb twitched, wanting to trace patterns on Vanessa's skin.

Kate closed her eyes, sinking into the leather seat. The memory of their kiss in the alley flooded back, when she'd had that crazy idea to push Vanessa back against the wall. Her lips tingled at the phantom sensation now as she remembered how soft Vanessa's lips were, how Vanessa had deepened the kiss.

The warmth of Vanessa's hand in hers now only made it worse. This wasn't real. It was never going to be. Kate had agreed to this arrangement knowing it would be difficult, but she'd severely underestimated just how much it would affect her.

Her thumb betrayed her, stroking once across Vanessa's knuckles before she could stop herself. Vanessa's grip tightened slightly in response. Kate kept her eyes firmly shut, afraid to look, afraid her face would reveal too much.

She'd signed up for this. A fake relationship to help them both. But it might just be the hardest thing she'd ever done. And they had weeks to go. Every touch, every shared glance, every moment alone together pulled her deeper into this mess.

"I'll see you tomorrow evening," Vanessa said, her voice carrying that hint of projection as if others were meant to overhear. "Eight o'clock? I can pick you up?"

"Sure," Kate said as her eyes fluttered open. "That would be great."

The car slowed to a stop outside Kate's townhouse. She withdrew her hand from Vanessa's, missing the contact immediately. Such a simple touch shouldn't leave her feeling so adrift. But it did. And tomorrow they'd do it all again. A romantic rooftop dinner for the cameras. That was the next thing Elliot had planned for them.

“Goodnight, Kate.” Vanessa leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to Kate’s cheek. Her lips lingered a fraction longer than necessary, sending sparks across Kate’s skin.

“Goodnight.” Kate’s voice came out barely above a whisper. She forced herself to move, to open the car door and step out into the cool night air before she did something stupid like turn her head and capture Vanessa’s lips with her own.

13

The waiter led Vanessa and Kate up a winding staircase, the clatter of the bustling restaurant below fading with each step. As they reached the top, the night air greeted them, carrying with it the steady rhythm of the ocean. Vanessa’s steps slowed as she took in the scene before her.

The rooftop had been transformed into a romantic oasis, full of soft lights and candles. A single table stood in the center, draped in pristine white linen, the flicker of candlelight casting a warm glow on the polished silverware.

Vanessa had requested a romantic setting, and the restaurant had delivered beyond her expectations. She couldn’t help but feel a pang of something, regret maybe, that this was all for show.

The ocean’s murmur provided a soothing soundtrack, and she hoped the gentle crashing of the waves would help calm her thoughts. She stole a glance at Kate, whose eyes reflected the dance of the candle flames, her expression a mix of awe and maybe nervousness.

The waiter pulled out their chairs, inviting them to sit. Although, she couldn’t imagine why Kate would be nervous. Lastnight was the time for Kate to have felt intimidated, but she’d handled everything with ease.

Vanessa watched as Kate settled into the chair across from her. She was wearing a tailored royal blue jumpsuit that hugged her figure perfectly, exuding an air of class and sophistication. The fabric complemented Kate's eyes, making them stand out even more. The top was sleeveless, showing off toned arms, and the silver pendant hanging from Kate's neckline was simple, yet it caught the light in a way that drew Vanessa's attention to her collarbone. Her blond hair was styled in loose waves, framing her face softly. The entire look was a blend of modern chic and classic elegance.

The waiter's voice faded into the background as Vanessa adjusted the lapel of her cream blazer. She'd spent nearly an hour in her walk-in closet earlier, pulling out outfit after outfit, knowing whatever she chose would be all over social media tomorrow. The blazer had been the right choice - tailored to emphasize her waist, paired with fitted black pants that elongated her legs. Underneath, she wore a black camisole that dipped just low enough to be interesting. Her dark hair was left straight tonight, falling a few inches below her shoulders.

"And our fish special tonight is a pan-seared Chilean sea bass..." The waiter's words drifted back into focus.

The outfit projected exactly what she needed. Powerful yet approachable, sexy but sophisticated. She'd learned long ago how to dress for the cameras while still looking like she hadn't tried.

The photographer that Elliot had tipped off was hidden somewhere across the street, but that was honestly the last thing on her mind as she lost herself in the moment, the setting, and the woman across from her.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

The waiter returned, presenting a bottle of Chablis with practiced flourish. Vanessa's gaze drifted to Kate as the waiter went through the ritual of showing the label, cutting the foil, and removing the cork. The soft pop echoed across the rooftop.

When the waiter tilted the bottle toward Vanessa for approval, she gestured to Kate. "Would you like to do the honors?"

The waiter poured a small amount into her glass. Kate lifted it and brought the glass to her nose, inhaling the wine's bouquet before taking a small sip.

A slight smile played at the corners of Kate's mouth as she nodded. "It's perfect."

The waiter proceeded to fill both their glasses, leaving the bottle nestled in the silver ice bucket between them.

Vanessa lifted her wine glass, taking a small sip while scanning the rooftops across the street. A shadow shifted. There he was. The photographer blended into the darkness in his black attire, but years of dealing with paparazzi had honed her ability to spot them. They'd chosen this restaurant specifically for its rooftop setup, but now she noticed a flaw in their positioning.

The table placement meant the photographer would only capture her, missing Kate's reactions entirely. That wouldn't do. The whole point was to show them together, to let the public see how in love they were. They both needed to be in those photos.

At least the lighting was perfect. The string lights cast a warm glow that would look great on camera, and the moon hung low and bright over the ocean. But none of it

would matter if they couldn't get the right shot.

Her fingers played with the stem of her wine glass as she considered their options. Before they left, Vanessa would have to make sure that they stood at the edge of the rooftop and admired the view.

A light breeze carried the salt air across the rooftop, stirring Kate's hair. The slight momentarily distracted Vanessa from her tactical planning. Kate looked radiant in the gentle light, and for a brief moment, Vanessa forgot about the photographer entirely. She caught herself staring.

Kate's eyes met Vanessa's, catching her mid-stare. A small smile tugged at the corner of Kate's mouth.

"This is quite the setting." Kate's voice carried across the table.

"It is." Vanessa took another sip of wine, savoring its crisp notes.

Kate's blue eyes held Vanessa's. "I know we don't know each other very well, not really, but you can trust me. Yesterday must have been hard. And I just wanted you to know that I'm here if you want to talk about it."

The genuine concern in Kate's voice touched something deep inside Vanessa. She shook her head, pushing away the image of Lauren's face from the party. "Let's not bring down the evening."

"Okay," Kate said as she reached for her glass and took a sip.

"But thank you," Vanessa added. "And we might not know each other well, but for what it's worth, I do actually feel like I can trust you."

The breeze picked up, carrying with it the distant sound of waves crashing against the shore. Vanessa focused on that rhythm, using it to ground herself in the present moment rather than dwelling on memories of yesterday's confrontation.

"I'm glad," Kate said.

Vanessa's eyes lingered on Kate's profile as the younger woman gazed toward the ocean.

"While we wait for our dinner..." Vanessa pushed back her chair. "The view from the edge is amazing. Would you like to see it?"

"I'd love to."

They both stood, leaving their wine glasses behind. Vanessa extended her hand, and Kate's fingers slipped into hers. The contact sent a small thrill up her arm. She led Kate toward the edge of the rooftop, conscious of the photographer's position across the street but finding herself distracted by how natural it felt to hold Kate's hand.

They reached the low wall that bordered the rooftop. The moon created a shimmering path across the dark water. A gentle breeze lifted Kate's hair, and Vanessa watched as a few strands danced across her face. Without thinking, she reached up and tucked them behind Kate's ear, her fingertips grazing the soft skin there.

"You look stunning tonight," Vanessa murmured, her hand lingering near Kate's face. The words came easily, naturally - too naturally for someone who was supposed to be acting.

Kate's lips tugged into a smile, her eyes glinting with amusement. "You know that photographer can't hear us."

“I know.” She hesitated for a moment, her fingers still resting lightly on Kate’s cheek. The warmth of her skin was intoxicating, and Vanessa had to resist the urge to lean in closer. “But I wanted to say it.”

Kate’s smile softened, her eyes searching Vanessa’s face as if trying to read her thoughts.

Vanessa hated how much she wanted to kiss Kate, but at the same time, that was exactly what this moment called for. The photographer hidden across the street needed to capture the perfect shot, and this could be it.

Vanessa hesitated, her eyes flickering down to Kate’s lips. She could almost feel the softness, the warmth. The memory of their first kiss in the alley still lingered.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“Can I kiss you?” Vanessa asked softly.

“Yes,” Kate murmured, her eyes never leaving Vanessa’s.

Vanessa leaned in, her eyes locked onto Kate’s, the anticipation building between them like a rising tide. As their lips met, it was as if time itself had slowed down, allowing them to savor every moment of this slow, sensual dance. The softness of Kate’s lips against her own was intoxicating, a gentle caress that sent a ripple of electricity through Vanessa’s entire body.

Kate’s hands slid beneath Vanessa’s blazer, her fingertips grazing the silky fabric of Vanessa’s camisole. A shiver ran through Vanessa, her breath catching in her throat as a wave of desire washed over her.

This kiss was different from the ones they’d shared before. It was slow, deliberate, a languid exploration that Vanessa couldn’t seem to get enough of. Kate’s lips moved against hers with a tenderness that made her heart ache, and Vanessa felt herself melting into the kiss, her body leaning into Kate’s, her hand slipping underneath her hair, resting at the nape of her neck.

Vanessa could feel the tension in her body, the coiled heat that threatened to consume her. She wanted to lose herself in the moment, to forget the photographer, the public, the carefully crafted image that they were trying to present. She just wanted to kiss Kate for the sake of kissing her, for the pure joy of it.

Kate’s thumbs traced circles on Vanessa’s waist, sending waves of heat coursing through her, and Vanessa knew that she had to pull away.

Vanessa's eyes fluttered open, meeting Kate's gaze. She searched Kate's eyes, looking for a reflection of her own feelings, but Vanessa had no idea what Kate was thinking.

Vanessa swallowed. The photographer across the street had surely gotten what he came here for, but in that moment, Vanessa realized that the lines between reality and illusion were blurring, the boundaries of their staged romance crumbling beneath the weight of her desire. The kiss had been a part of the performance. But it had also been real.

At least for Vanessa it had been.

"We should probably get back to our table." The words came out thick, her throat tight.

Kate nodded, and they walked back to their seats in the center of the rooftop.

Vanessa's lips still tingled from Kate's kiss. That wasn't acting. Not for her.

She'd spent decades perfecting her craft, inhabiting different roles, different personas. But that kiss... Nothing about that had been a performance. Just raw, unfiltered want that scared her more than she cared to admit.

Vanessa reached for her wine glass, desperate for something to ground her. She took a careful sip, using the moment to compose herself. She set her glass down with steady hands, determined not to let her inner turmoil show. Kate didn't need to know how much that kiss had affected her.

How much all their kisses had affected her.

The waiter appeared at their table, plates balanced expertly in his hands. Steam rose

from the perfectly arranged dishes as he set them down. Vanessa stared at her sea bass, its crisp skin glistening under the candlelight. The aroma of herbs and citrus drifted up, but her appetite had vanished.

Her mind kept circling back to the kiss. To Kate's hands on her waist. To the way Kate's body had felt pressed against hers.

The waiter disappeared, leaving them alone again. Vanessa picked up her fork, more for something to do with her hands than any real desire to eat. The fish flaked perfectly under her fork. Kate took a small bite of her risotto, closing her eyes briefly as she savored it. The sight of her obvious pleasure sent a jolt through Vanessa's body. She forced herself to look away, to focus on her own plate.

This was getting dangerous. These weren't the kinds of thoughts she should be having about someone who she'd entered into an agreement with. Someone who was only kissing her for the cameras, to help her. Someone who was so much younger than her.

Vanessa had to get this under control quickly, or she'd have to put an end to this right now.

And maybe she should.

Their plan had worked perfectly. Too perfectly. The photos from the alley kiss had gone viral, sparking endless speculation and discussion. Social media couldn't get enough of them. Even the most cynical entertainment journalists seemed captivated by their story.

She could end it now. Walk away while they were ahead. They'd achieved what they set out to do: improve her image after Lauren's betrayal and give Kate a platform for coming out.

There was no reason to continue this charade.

And if they called this whole thing off, then maybe she could stop thinking about Kate's smile, or the way her eyes lit up when she laughed, or how soft her lips felt.

The smart thing would be to end it now.

She could call Elliot tomorrow. They could let the public believe they were still seeing each other, but maybe they were just being more private from now on. And then they could officially break up in a few weeks, just as they'd planned.

The logical part of her brain screamed at her to stop this now, while she still could.

While her heart was still mostly intact.

Kate gazed out the car window, the lights of the city blurring as they sped through the night. Her heart raced, replaying the feel of Vanessa's lips on hers, the warmth of her hand entwined with her own. It had felt so real, so achingly genuine, despite the fact that it had all been for show.

She stole a glance at Vanessa, whose expression was unreadable, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. Kate's stomach churned with uncertainty. How could she reconcile the passion they had shared with the knowledge that Vanessa felt nothing for her?

Kate's gaze drifted to the wing mirror again, scanning the road behind them. There were no flash of headlights, no cars getting a little too close. That photographer hadn't followed them. So, why had Vanessa wanted them to go back to hers?

The invitation had come just a few minutes after they'd gotten into the car. "Come back to mine?" Vanessa had asked.

Without the excuse of maintaining appearances, without an audience to convince, Kate struggled to understand Vanessa's motives. Their kisses at dinner had seared through her defenses, leaving her raw and exposed. But those had been calculated, orchestrated moments - hadn't they? The memory of Vanessa's fingers threading through her hair, drawing her closer, sent electricity down Kate's spine.

The houses grew larger, more palatial as they wound through the exclusive neighborhood. Each curve in the road intensified the flutter in Kate's stomach. Their evening had already delivered the photos they'd wanted. There was no reason to

extend their time together, no need to maintain the illusion behind closed doors.

So why had Vanessa asked? And why had Kate said yes without hesitation?

The car's bluetooth chimed, breaking the thick silence. Vanessa tapped the steering wheel control.

"Vanessa, darling." Elliot's voice filled the car's interior.

"Hi Elliot."

"Are you home?"

"Almost. Kate's with me."

"Perfect! I'm five minutes away. Mind if I stop by?"

Kate watched Vanessa's jaw tighten, a brief pause before her response. "Sure. See you in a few minutes."

Kate accepted the wine glass from Vanessa's outstretched hand, their fingers brushing, just as the front door opened.

Kate sank into the plush cushions of Vanessa's sofa, her heart thumping in her chest. Vanessa perched casually on the arm beside her. With each subtle shift, the brush of Vanessa's thigh against Kate's shoulder sent a tingling sensation down her arm. She swallowed hard, stealing glances at Vanessa out of the corner of her eye. The way Vanessa held herself, poised yet relaxed, only heightened the tension in the air. Kate tried to breathe normally as a rush of warmth crept up her neck.

Just then, Elliot breezed into the living room, his phone held high like a trophy.

“Ladies, you’ve outdone yourselves. The internet is ablaze! Look at these headlines.”

Elliot leaned closer to them, angling his device so they could see. Kate’s throat tightened at the image. Her and Vanessa on the rooftop, bodies pressed together, lost in what had been an amazing kiss. At least it had been for her.

Vanessa leaned forward too, their shoulders almost touching as they peered at Elliot’s screen. The closeness sent another thrill through Kate.

“‘Hollywood’s New Power Couple’!” Elliot read aloud with exaggerated flair. “And this one: ‘Vanessa Prescott Moves On with Rising Star Kate Monroe!’ Plus, TMZ is calling this the romance of the year.” Elliot paced the room, his excitement filling the space.

“The response on social has been astronomical.” Elliot scrolled through his phone. “The chemistry is—” He paused, looking up at them with narrowed eyes. “Well. Let’s just say no one’s questioning the authenticity.”

Kate’s cheeks burned. She took a long sip of wine, avoiding Vanessa’s gaze.

Kate watched Elliot drop into an armchair across from them, crossing his legs. His enthusiasm radiated through the room.

“I’m glad that your here, Kate,” Elliot said. “I’ve already had three major outlets request exclusive interviews. But before we do any of those, you two need to spend some quality time together. Away from the cameras. Get comfortable with your story, make it feel natural. We need authenticity,” Elliot continued. “When they ask how you met, when sparks first flew? You can’t hesitate. You can’t give different answers. The tabloids will tear that apart faster than you can blink. I know you’ve had a bit of practice with this last night on the red carpet, but I’m talking about in-depth interviews here. Follow up questions. You need to be comfortable with that or all of

this has been for nothing.”

Kate bit the inside of her cheek. The idea of spending more time with Vanessa both thrilled and terrified her. Their staged moments already felt too real. Could she really keep going like this? And even if she could, how was she going to go back to her normal life after this?

“What kind of quality time are we talking about?” Vanessa’s voice carried a hint of wariness.

“Well,” Elliot gestured at them with his phone, “continue what you’re doing right now. You’re both here sharing a bottle of wine, and no one is watching. Just talk.” He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. “Get to know each other beyond the surface details. Share stories about your childhood, your first acting gig, favorite memories. The stuff real couples know about each other.”

Kate’s pulse quickened. She glanced at Vanessa, catching the slight furrow in her brow, the way her fingers played with the sleeve of her blazer.

“The best lies,” Elliot continued, “are built on truth. So find your common ground. Oh, and there’s just one other thing.” He stood up as he glanced around the room. “The contracts. I left them in the car. Be back in a sec.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

The front door clicked shut behind him, leaving Kate alone with Vanessa. The air thickened between them.

“More wine?” Vanessa’s voice broke the silence.

“Please.”

Kate watched as Vanessa rose from the sofa’s arm, her tailored cream blazer shifting with the movement. “I’ll grab the rest of that bottle from the kitchen.”

The click of Vanessa’s heels against the hardwood marked her path across the living room. Kate took a steadying breath, but the lingering warmth where Vanessa had sat beside her remained.

Vanessa returned, bottle in hand, and her fingers brushed Kate’s as she took her glass. The touch, brief as it was, sent electricity through Kate’s arm. She watched, transfixed, as Vanessa poured the wine, golden liquid catching the soft lighting. Vanessa’s perfume drifted over Kate. A subtle, intoxicating scent that made her head spin more than the wine.

The front door opened again, and Elliot strode back in, manila envelope in hand. “Now, ladies, can you please sign these contracts? Every day I grow more anxious.”

Kate watched him open the envelope and fan the papers across Vanessa’s glass coffee table with theatrical precision.

“I know there’s no money changing hands,” he continued, “but there has to be some

kind of guarantee that if things go sideways, no one's running to the press about being someone's fake girlfriend." He looked at both of them. "The NDA at least? Please. It's keeping me up at night."

Kate glanced at Vanessa, who raised an eyebrow at Elliot's dramatics. The paperwork lay in front of her, reminding her that this was all business.

Vanessa's voice cut through Elliot's theatrics. "Leave them on the coffee table. We'll look at them later."

Elliot's phone buzzed. "Oh! That's Logan. I should get going." He slid his phone into his pocket. "You've given me life tonight. Those photos were even better than the last ones." He pressed air kisses to both their cheeks. "Kate, you're a natural. And Vanessa—" He paused for dramatic effect. "Lauren who?"

Kate's shoulders tensed at the mention of Lauren.

"Get some rest," Elliot said, and then he showed himself out.

The silence that followed Elliot's departure was deafening. Kate sat frozen, the sound of the front door clicking shut reverberating through the expansive room. The distant sound of a car engine pulling away punctuated the silence, the muffled roar fading into the night. Kate found herself holding her breath, waiting for Vanessa to break the tension that had settled between them.

Vanessa was still standing, and she bent down to slip off her heels before she padded across the room, wine glass in hand. She stopped at the windows that overlooked the city in the distance.

In the reflection of the glass, Kate could see Vanessa's expression. It was pensive, her brow slightly furrowed as she gazed out at the night. Kate found herself transfixed,

trying to decipher the thoughts that played behind those hazel eyes.

Was Vanessa thinking about the events of the evening? The way their bodies had fit together on the rooftop, the heat of their staged kisses that had felt anything but fake? Or was her mind on Lauren? On the confrontation at the after-party?

“Vanessa?” Kate ventured, setting her wine down on the coffee table. “Why did you ask me to come back here with you?”

Vanessa turned to look at her, her eyes flicking to the stack of contracts Elliot had left behind. She opened her mouth, then closed it again in a rare moment of hesitation from someone who always seemed so sure of herself.

“I...” Vanessa sighed. “I wanted to talk to you. About all of this.” She gestured vaguely between them.

“Is something wrong?” Kate asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“No, nothing’s wrong, exactly.” She took a deep breath. “I just... I wanted to make sure you’re still comfortable with all of this.”

Kate blinked, caught off guard by Vanessa’s words. Her heart raced as she wondered if Vanessa could somehow sense the truth. That Kate’s feelings for her were genuine.

Kate swallowed hard, trying to keep her expression neutral. She couldn’t risk Vanessa discovering the truth. What would Vanessa even think of her if she knew?

With a steadying breath, Kate met Vanessa’s eyes, her heart pounding in her chest. “I am,” she said, though the words felt heavy on her tongue. “Are you?”

Vanessa’s expression shifted, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her features. She took a

sip of her wine, the motion graceful and measured, before turning to gaze out the window once more.

“I don’t know,” Vanessa said quietly. “We’ve done what we set out to do, and the headlines are...” She paused, her brow furrowing slightly. “The photos look good. Everyone thinks we’re together, but I...” She trailed off, her eyes fixed on the glittering lights of the city.

Kate watched Vanessa closely, the tension in the older woman’s shoulders betraying her outwardly calm demeanor. She longed to reach out, to offer some comfort, but the invisible barrier between them felt impenetrable.

“I should be happy,” Vanessa said. “This is what we wanted, isn’t it? A fairytale romance to distract from the mess with Lauren.” She turned to face Kate, her expression unreadable. “But I...” She shook her head, a wry smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “I don’t feel happy.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Kate's heart clenched at the vulnerability in Vanessa's voice. She wanted to cross the room, to gather Vanessa in her arms and hold her, to reassure her that everything would be alright. But the knowledge that none of this was real kept her rooted to the spot.

"Vanessa..." she began, unsure of what to say. "I..."

Vanessa raised a hand, silencing her. "I'm sorry, Kate. I shouldn't have asked you to come back here. I just..." She sighed, her gaze drifting back to the window. "I needed to talk to someone, and you..." She paused, a faint smile playing on her lips. "Well, you're the only one I can talk to about this."

Kate slipped off her heels and crossed the room to join Vanessa at the window. Vanessa turned to face her, her eyes searching Kate's face with an intensity that made her breath catch in her throat.

"Are you happy?" Vanessa asked. "With how this has all played out? You're officially out now, and I'm..." A slight smile tugged at her lips. "Well, I guess I'm a cougar now."

"No one cares about the age difference."

"At least it works for you," Vanessa said, a hint of a smile still on her lips. "That first night we met. You said you were interested in older women."

"I did. And I am."

Vanessa took a sip of her wine. “You’ll have your pick, Kate. When this is all over, you’ll have your choice of women. Young, old, it won’t matter. You’re a rising star. Everyone will want you.”

Kate felt a pang in her chest. The thought of being with anyone else felt wrong somehow.

“But you still didn’t answer my question,” Vanessa said. “Are you happy?”

“I’m...” Kate paused, choosing her words carefully. How could she explain that being with Vanessa, even in this manufactured way, felt more real than anything else in her life? “I’m happy that I’m out, yes, and I’m glad it’s you,” she said finally. “That I did this with you.”

Vanessa’s eyes widened, and Kate couldn’t help but notice the way her lips parted slightly in surprise. She wondered if Vanessa could hear the tremble in her voice, the way her heart pounded in her chest.

“You’re glad it’s me?” Vanessa asked.

Kate nodded, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. “Yes,” she said softly. “I am.”

Vanessa’s gaze softened. “I’m glad it’s you too, Kate,” she said. “When Elliot suggested this... I didn’t know if I could do it. If I could really put myself out there so soon, even if it’s just for pretend. But you’ve made it surprisingly easy. But we should probably sign those NDAs,” Vanessa said, her voice quiet but firm. She gestured toward the coffee table where Elliot had left the papers. “Before he has an aneurysm.”

Kate watched as Vanessa moved away from the window, her bare feet silent against the hardwood floor. The older woman disappeared into the kitchen, returning

moments later with two pens.

Kate knelt beside the coffee table, the legal documents spread out in front of her. She pulled one closer, scanning the dense paragraphs. Vanessa settled beside her, close enough that Kate caught the scent of her perfume again. Vanessa's dark hair fell forward as she leaned over the papers, creating a curtain that partially obscured her face.

Without hesitation, Vanessa picked up one of the pens and signed her name with elegant strokes. She slid the second pen across the table to Kate, their fingers brushing briefly.

Kate's hand trembled slightly as she gripped the pen. She stared at the signature line, before moving her gaze to the start, reading over every line before she signed it.

The scratch of the pen seemed impossibly loud in the quiet room. When Kate finished, she looked up to find Vanessa watching her, those hazel eyes unreadable in the soft lighting.

Kate watched as Vanessa gathered the papers, tapping them into a neat stack against the glass surface of the coffee table.

"Do you want to stay?" Vanessa slipped the papers back into the manila envelope. "Or I can call my driver to take you home?"

Kate hesitated.

"We can take Elliot's advice and get to know one another better."

"True." Kate swallowed. This was a bad idea. "Okay, I'll stay." She glanced down at her jumpsuit. "Although at this rate, I should start leaving clothes here."

“You probably should.” Vanessa’s eyes lingered on Kate for a moment before she stood, envelope in hand.

Kate’s breath caught at Vanessa’s words. Even these small moments of closeness, wrapped in the excuse of their arrangement, made her head spin.

15

Vanessa stood in her kitchen, the morning light filtering through the large windows, casting a soft glow on the marble countertops. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air as she cradled the warm mug in her hands, her thoughts drifting to the events of the previous night.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

She had been so close to telling Kate the truth, to confessing that this arrangement was becoming too much for her. The lines between reality and pretense were blurring, and Vanessa didn't know how she could keep going like this.

But in the end, they had signed the non-disclosure agreements, cementing their commitment to this charade. Vanessa sighed. She couldn't help but wonder if she had made the right decision.

As she took another sip of coffee, Vanessa's mind wandered to all the moments they'd already shared. She thought of the way Kate's hand had felt in hers, the warmth of her skin and the electricity that seemed to flow between them whenever they were close.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to separate her true feelings from the act they were putting on. She couldn't deny the pull she felt towards Kate, the way her heart raced when she looked at her with those expressive eyes, the way her breath caught in her throat when they kissed, even if it was just for the cameras.

As she finished her coffee, Vanessa tried to push those thoughts aside, to focus on the task at hand. She needed to call Elliot.

Vanessa took a deep breath and picked up her phone, dialing Elliot's number. She paced the kitchen as she waited for him to answer.

"Vanessa, darling!" Elliot's voice rang through the phone. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this early morning call?"

“I need you to hold off on scheduling any interviews,” Vanessa said.

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line. “Why?”

Vanessa sighed, leaning against the kitchen counter. “I’m just...exhausted, Elliot. These last few days have been incredibly hectic, and I need some time to catch my breath.”

She could practically hear the gears turning in Elliot’s head as he considered her words. “Okay. I get that.”

Vanessa felt a wave of relief wash over her at Elliot’s understanding. She had been worried that he would push back.

“Actually, that reminds me,” Elliot continued, his tone brightening. “Logan had a cancellation at his cabin, so I went ahead and booked it for you and Kate. Two weeks from tomorrow. I thought it might be a good opportunity for you two to get away from the city for a bit, to relax and recharge. And of course, I’ll have a trusted photographer tipped off.”

Vanessa’s heart sank at Elliot’s words. A weekend away with Kate, under the guise of their fake romance, was the last thing she needed right now. She couldn’t help but feel like she was being swept away by a current she couldn’t control.

But she knew that refusing the trip would only raise more questions, and she had agreed to all this.

“Sure, that sounds great,” Vanessa said. “You’ll tell Kate?”

“I’ll call her right now.”

“Thanks. Oh, and Elliot? We signed the NDAs.”

“Oh, thank god!” Elliot’s voice rose with relief. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear that.” His words tumbled out in a rush. “Anyway, I’ll let you go. Bye!”

The line went dead before Vanessa could respond. She placed her phone on the counter, staring at its dark screen. She leaned heavily against the counter, her eyes closing as she tried to steady her racing thoughts. She knew that each moment they spent together only made it harder to separate her true feelings from the act they were putting on.

How had this even happened?

She thought back to when Kate had come here with Elliot, when they officially agreed to all this. Vanessa had thought Kate was attractive. Most people would. But how had she gotten to this point so quickly?

Looking back, her relationship with Lauren had been over for longer than she cared to admit, but it wasn’t like her to fall this hard, this fast.

Vanessa took a deep breath. She knew that if she really wanted to, she could cancel the trip.

But a part of her, the part that longed for Kate’s touch and craved the warmth of her smile, couldn’t bring herself to do it. Despite the risk to her heart, despite the uncertainty of what lay ahead, Vanessa knew that she wanted this time with Kate.

16

Kate pulled her suitcase from the closet and dropped it on her bed. The afternoon sun streamed through her bedroom window as she started to pack.

The last two weeks had dragged by. When Kate had left Vanessa's the morning after signing the NDAs, Kate had imagined they'd see each other again in a few days for whatever Elliot had lined up for them, but Elliot had called just a few minutes after she'd gotten home, saying that Vanessa needed some space.

Kate pulled one of her favorite blouses down from its hanger. She folded it and added it to the suitcase, thinking about how every touch, every look between them had seemed so real even though Kate knew none of it was.

Kate paused at her dresser, staring at her reflection. Her cheeks flushed pink at the memory of Vanessa's hand in hers as they left the restaurant, of the way Vanessa had asked if she could kiss her. What if Kate had given too much away? That was all she could think about these last two weeks.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

What if Vanessa knew?

The buzz of her phone made her jump. A text from Elliot with the address for the cabin. Kate added a light jacket to her suitcase, picturing cool evenings on the deck. Alone. With Vanessa. For an entire weekend.

Kate clicked the link in Elliot's text, opening photos of Logan's cabin. Her thumb swiped through images of a cabin tucked away in the woods. Pine walls and exposed beams gave way to sleek furniture and updated appliances. The kitchen opened to a great room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a wooded valley.

She paused on a photo of the master bedroom. A king-sized bed dominated the space, draped in crisp white linens. The second bedroom appeared smaller but it would do. At least there were two bedrooms.

The next photo made her pause. A jacuzzi on the back deck, steam rising into the mountain air. Kate walked to her dresser and pulled out a black bikini. The fabric slipped through her fingers as she considered whether to pack it. She tossed it into her suitcase before she could overthink it.

She just hoped this weekend wouldn't be too awkward. There was the real possibility that everything was fine, that Vanessa really had just wanted time to herself after all of the headlines, after seeing Lauren again, and maybe Vanessa had no idea how much Kate actually cared about her.

That was all Kate could hope for.

She finished packing and zipped the suitcase closed, her stomach in knots. A whole weekend of pretending her heart didn't skip when Vanessa smiled. Of reminding herself this was all for show, no matter how real it felt.

17

Vanessa wandered through the cabin's open-plan living area. Pine beams stretched across the vaulted ceiling, and a stone fireplace dominated one wall. The furnishings struck a balance between rustic and modern luxury - plush leather sofas in deep brown, accented with faux fur throws and pillows. Built-in bookshelves lined the walls, filled with leather-bound classics and art books. The kitchen opened to the living space, all gleaming stainless steel and polished granite.

Her footsteps echoed in the empty space as she crossed to the kitchen. The black countertops gleamed under pendant lights, and the wine fridge hummed softly. She pulled out a bottle of Chardonnay, the glass cool against her palm.

The cork released with a satisfying pop that broke the cabin's silence. She poured herself a glass, carrying it out onto the wraparound deck. The afternoon sun painted long shadows through the trees, and a light breeze stirred her hair.

Vanessa lifted the glass to her lips, the crisp wine doing little to settle her restless mind. Her gaze drifted to the winding gravel driveway below. Kate would be here soon, and she had to figure out what she was going to do about all this.

Not wanting the photographer that Elliot had tipped off to catch her looking nervous, she went back inside. She walked down the hall and paused at the entrance to both bedrooms. The master suite sprawled to her right, its king bed dressed in crisp white linens. The guest room was across the hall, smaller but no less luxurious. She'd left her bags in the master without thinking when she arrived, but now she wondered if she should move them.

She took another sip of wine and checked her phone. 4:17 PM. Kate could be here any moment. She'd told Elliot that she would be there between four and six.

Vanessa sunk down onto the bed in the master bedroom. What was she going to do? She could let this weekend play out, get more photos of them together, and then end this whole thing. Or she could talk to Kate when she got here and finally just tell her that she couldn't handle doing this anymore. But then why had they even bothered coming up here? She could have had that conversation at home, like she almost had the last time they were together.

She took another drink. This was a disaster. Well, not from Elliot's point of view, and not from hers either if she'd been able to keep this arrangement professional.

Vanessa swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat.

What would Kate think if she knew? If she knew that every time Vanessa had kissed her, that it had meant something to her, that she wasn't acting. That it had been Vanessa that had deepened the kiss, not as part of the act, but because she wanted to.

She sucked in a breath. She had to sort this out. The guilt was getting worse by the day. She'd thought that not seeing or speaking to Kate in the last two weeks would help, but it hadn't. It had nearly made things worse.

Vanessa drained her glass and set it on the nightstand. She unzipped her suitcase, pushing aside neatly folded clothes until she found her black one-piece swimsuit and got changed.

She stood in front of the mirror, checking her reflection before gathering her dark hair, the strands slipping like silk through her fingers as she pushed them up into a loose bun. A few wisps escaped, but it would do. She grabbed a plush white towel from the rack in the bathroom and reached for her empty wine glass. She padded into

the kitchen and poured another generous glass of wine.

Outside, the late afternoon sun had softened to a golden glow. The jacuzzi sat on the back deck, and when she pressed the control panel, the jets burst to life, churning the surface into white foam. The display showed the temperature rising.

Vanessa placed her wine glass on the wooden ledge and draped her towel over a nearby chair. The mountain air prickled her exposed skin, and she took in the view as she waited for the water to warm, knowing that the photographer Elliot had tipped off was out there somewhere.

Steam curled off the water's surface as Vanessa dipped her toe in to test the temperature. Perfect. She stepped down onto the first seat, the heat seeping into her muscles. Another step down, and the water rose to her thighs. She lowered herself into the deepest part of the tub, a small gasp escaping her lips as the hot water embraced her shoulders.

The tension in her neck began to dissolve. She leaned back against the curved edge, positioning herself near her wine glass. The jets pulsed against her lower back, working out knots she hadn't realized were there.

Vanessa closed her eyes and tilted her head back. The mountain air cooled her face while the rest of her body surrendered to the warmth. For the first time in weeks, her mind quieted. No thoughts of Lauren, no worries about the press, no confusion about Kate. Just the rhythmic bubbling of water and a chilled bottle of wine.

18

Kate pulled up to the cabin, gravel crunching under her tires, and her heart thumped against her ribs as she cut the engine. She took a deep breath before she got out of the car. She could do this. But Kate was starting to wonder if she should find a reason to

leave L.A. for a week or two, disappear just like Vanessa had. That would make the next few weeks easier, and then before she knew it, their arrangement would be over, and Kate could stop torturing herself like this.

Kate took her suitcase out of the truck and walked up to the impressive cabin. She found the door unlocked and stepped into a grand open-concept living area. Exposed beams stretched across vaulted ceilings.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“Vanessa?” Her voice echoed through the empty space.

Kate wheeled her suitcase across the hardwood floors, past leather couches and a fully equipped kitchen with black countertops. A hallway led to what appeared to be the bedrooms.

Kate found Vanessa’s designer suitcase in the master bedroom, positioned neatly beside the king-sized bed. The sight of Vanessa’s belongings twisted something in her chest. She backed out and wheeled her own luggage into the guest room, a cozy space with a queen bed and windows overlooking the forest.

Back in the main living area, Kate noticed glass doors leading to a huge deck. Beyond the glass, steam rose from what must be the jacuzzi she’d seen in the photos.

Kate stepped onto the deck, and her breath caught. Vanessa reclined in the steaming water, her dark hair swept up in a loose knot that exposed the elegant line of her neck. Droplets glistened on her bare shoulders under the warm glow of the porch lights. The way she relaxed against the jacuzzi’s edge, eyes closed and lips slightly parted, made Kate’s heart race.

“Hey,” Kate finally managed to say, her voice low as she stepped closer.

Vanessa opened her eyes slowly, a hint of surprise flickering across her features before a soft smile spread across her face. “Hi.”

The sight of that smile lit something inside Kate, a warmth that spread through her chest and ignited a familiar flutter deep in her stomach.

“Are you going to join me?” Vanessa tilted her head slightly, playful curiosity shining in those hazel eyes. “There’s a bottle of wine open in the kitchen.”

“Sure.” Kate swallowed down her nerves. “I’ll go change.”

In the guest room, Kate unzipped her suitcase and pulled out her black bikini. She got changed, trying not to panic about being in a jacuzzi with Vanessa. She caught her reflection in the mirror. The bikini hugged her curves, revealing more than she’d planned when she packed it. But it was too late to change her mind now.

Kate paused in the kitchen, grabbing a wine glass from the cabinet. The bottle of Chardonnay sat on the counter, beads of condensation rolling down its sides. She poured herself a generous glass, taking a long sip and reaching for the bottle before heading back outside.

“Top up?” Kate asked.

Kate approached the jacuzzi. The steam curled around Vanessa’s shoulders, creating an ethereal glow in the dim light.

“Please.” Vanessa lifted her glass, water droplets cascading down her arm.

Their fingers brushed as Kate took the glass. A spark of electricity shot through her palm, up her arm. She poured the wine, willing her hand to stay steady.

When Kate looked up, Vanessa’s gaze met hers. Those hazel eyes caught the light, turning almost golden. For a moment, Kate swore Vanessa’s eyes dipped lower, trailing down her body before darting back up to her eyes.

But that had to be Kate’s imagination playing tricks.

The same imagination that kept replaying their kisses, finding meaning in casual touches, reading too much into every smile. Kate knew better than to trust her own perception when it came to Vanessa. She'd spent too many hours analyzing every interaction, desperately searching for signs that weren't there.

Kate set the empty bottle down on the deck and stepped into the hot water. The heat enveloped her legs as she sank down, settling onto the bench beside Vanessa, leaving space between them. She took a long sip of wine, letting the crisp flavor wash away the tightness in her throat.

Kate swirled the wine in her glass, letting the aroma fill her nose before taking another sip. The Chardonnay danced across her tongue, bright notes of apple and citrus mingling with hints of oak.

"This is nice." Kate lifted her glass. The wine offered a welcome distraction from the way Vanessa's presence made her skin tingle.

"It is." Vanessa's voice carried a rich warmth that rivaled the jacuzzi's heat. "Logan always keeps his wine selection well-stocked."

Kate watched the steam rise between them, curling in delicate spirals that disappeared into the night air. Kate nodded, focusing on her wine glass rather than the way water droplets traced paths down Vanessa's collarbone.

Kate took another sip of wine, steadying herself. "Elliot mentioned you needed to take a step back."

"I should have told you myself." Vanessa closed her eyes for a second as she shook her head. "I generally avoid being in the headlines, and I guess, it all kind of caught up with me? I don't know. It probably doesn't make sense. You'd think I'd be used to all this by now."

“No, I understand.” Kate might not have had much experience with being chased after by photographers or seeing her name in the headlines, but she did know that those first few days had been a lot, for different reasons, but it had still been overwhelming.

Kate watched a droplet of water trail down Vanessa’s collarbone, disappearing beneath the water’s surface. She forced her eyes back up to Vanessa’s face.

Kate wondered if there was something more to Vanessa needing space. Maybe it had nothing to do with her and letting her true feelings show. Maybe it was about Vanessa’s feelings. “Are you sure you don’t still have feelings for Lauren?”

Vanessa’s eyes widened. “God no.” She reached for her glass. “Although I seem to have developed feelings for someone that I really shouldn’t.” She tilted her head back and took a long drink.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Kate's heart plummeted. Her mind flashed back to the after-party, to Vanessa and Evelyn Coleman standing beside one another, their bodies close. She remembered the way Evelyn's hand had lingered on Vanessa's arm, a gesture that seemed to carry more intimacy than simply friendship. Evelyn was married though, so maybe that was what Vanessa meant.

A rustling sound came from the woods. It was distant, but it still made her turn her head, although it was too dark to see anything. "Please tell me that's the photographer Elliot mentioned and not a bear," Kate whispered.

"Don't worry. I spotted him earlier when I got in." Vanessa took a sip of wine. "He's been lurking around since sunset, taking photos through the trees. But I made sure that Elliot told him to stay outside the property line. So he can't hear us, and I just can't handle that level of invasion."

Kate's muscles relaxed. At least they wouldn't end up as bear food tonight. Though the idea of being watched was always going to be weird.

Kate watched as Vanessa set her wine glass on the deck's edge. Her movements were slow, deliberate, as she shifted closer in the water. The space between them vanished.

"I suppose we should give him a decent shot." Vanessa's voice dropped low.

Kate's breath hitched as Vanessa's fingers traced along her jawline, guiding her face closer. The touch sparked electricity across her skin. Kate's heartbeat pulsed in her ears. She knew this was just another performance, a necessary facade. But her mind couldn't quite convince her body as Vanessa's lips brushed against hers.

Kate sighed as Vanessa's hand cupped the back of her neck, pulling her into the kiss.

It was electric. Vanessa's lips molded against hers, soft and inviting. Kate's mind spun as the kiss deepened. Water lapped gently against them in the jacuzzi, steam swirling around them. Kate's fingertips grazed Vanessa's shoulder, dipping beneath the surface to trace the damp skin there.

Kate's heart thundered in her chest as Vanessa's tongue traced her bottom lip, and Kate responded, parting her lips, letting herself fall deeper into the kiss. For these precious moments, she could pretend this was real. That the photographer in the woods didn't exist. That this wasn't just another performance for the cameras.

But it was. And that knowledge sat like lead in her stomach, even as the kiss continued to steal her breath away.

When they parted, Kate's forehead rested against Vanessa's. Her heart hammered in her chest. "I never should've agreed to this," she whispered, the words slipping from Kate's lips in a hushed confession.

Vanessa pulled back, just far enough to meet her eyes. Their gazes locked, and Kate wished she could take those words back.

19

Vanessa's heart stilled. The steam rose between them as she searched Kate's face, trying to decipher the meaning behind that loaded statement. The warmth of Kate's breath mingled with her own, and Vanessa's fingers tightened on Kate's waist beneath the bubbling water.

"What do you mean?"

Kate's eyes widened, a flash of panic crossing her features as she put some space between them, reaching behind her for her glass. "Forget I said anything."

But Vanessa couldn't forget. The words echoed in her mind, matching the thundering of her pulse. She recognized that tone, that look. Her hand found Kate's arm under the water, holding her in place before she could retreat further.

"Kate." Vanessa waited until those blue eyes met hers again. "Tell me."

The jets hummed around them. In the distance, a twig snapped, the photographer shifting position, no doubt capturing this moment of charged silence. But for once, Vanessa didn't care about the audience. Her focus remained on Kate's face, watching emotions play across it like light on water.

Kate swallowed hard. "This isn't fair to you." Her voice cracked. "Any of it."

"Not fair to me?" A dry laugh escaped her lips. "Kate, if anyone's getting the raw end of this deal, it's you. You've just come out to the entire world, and you can't even ask a woman out."

Kate's eyes dropped to the water's surface. "The woman I'd want to ask out wouldn't be interested anyway." She took a long drink.

The words hit Vanessa like a physical blow. Her chest constricted as she pictured Kate with someone else. Another young actress maybe. The thought shouldn't hurt this much, but it did. She drew in a steadying breath, forcing her voice to remain even.

"You never know." Vanessa tried to keep her voice casual. "Not until you ask."

Vanessa watched as Kate turned to put her glass down behind her. The movement

drew Vanessa's attention to the droplets trailing down Kate's shoulder.

"But I'm not sure that I can live with the rejection or the embarrassment," Kate said with a sigh.

The vulnerability in Kate's voice tugged at something deep in Vanessa's chest. "Is she out?"

Kate nodded.

"Single?" Vanessa's throat tightened around the word.

“Yes.”

An uncomfortable weight settled in Vanessa’s stomach. She tried to push away the sharp edge of jealousy that cut through her thoughts.

“Is it anyone I know?” Vanessa’s heart clenched as she waited for Kate’s response, trying to keep her voice level.

Kate’s chest rose with a deep breath, and Vanessa found herself tracking the movement, mesmerized by the way the water beaded on Kate’s skin.

“Just the most talented, beautiful woman in Hollywood,” Kate said with a sad smile.

Vanessa had to look away. Her jaw clenched as she pictured this mystery woman.

“She’s entirely out of my league,” Kate continued, her voice dropping lower, “but when she kisses me... I can’t think of anything else.”

Vanessa’s mind stumbled, then raced backward.

Kate wasn’t talking about someone else.

Kate was talking about her.

The realization crashed through her defenses, scattering all her carefully constructed reasons for keeping her distance.

She tried to form words, but her throat closed around them. Her pulse thundered in her ears as two weeks of denial crumbled. She'd pushed Kate away, convinced herself it was better, safer, when all along, Kate had been feeling the same impossible pull.

The jealousy that had been twisting in her gut morphed into something else entirely, a mix of disbelief, hope, and a yearning so intense it made her dizzy.

She searched Kate's face, looking for any sign that she'd misunderstood. But there was only raw honesty in those blue eyes, a vulnerability that made Vanessa want to pull her close and never let go.

"Kate..." Vanessa's voice came out as a whisper, barely audible over the hum of the jets.

Then Kate's expression shifted, panic rising in her eyes. "This is why I didn't want to say anything?—"

Without a second thought, Vanessa leaned forward and captured Kate's lips in a hard, desperate kiss. The shock of it made Kate gasp, but she didn't pull away. Instead, her hands found their way to Vanessa's shoulders, holding on as if she were drowning.

The kiss consumed her. Vanessa's hands moved to Kate's waist, pulling her closer. She angled her head, her lips moving against Kate's with a fierce desperation that felt entirely new. Never had a kiss affected her so completely, clouded her mind, and obliterated every rational thought.

As amazing as their previous kisses had been, this one was different. It was real.

The kiss deepened as she leaned back, pulling Kate with her until she straddled Vanessa's lap. The movement brought their bodies into full contact, and Vanessa

groaned at the sensation. Her hands moved to Kate's hips, guiding her closer. All the pent-up longing she had tried to ignore for weeks poured out in this kiss, and she couldn't get enough.

Her heart pounded in her chest as their mouths moved together. Vanessa's hands slid up Kate's back, her thumbs finding the dips of Kate's spine, the slick fabric of her bikini the only barrier between them.

Breaking the kiss, she trailed her lips along Kate's jaw, tasting the salt of her skin. Kate's head fell back, baring her neck, and Vanessa took advantage, placing open-mouthed kisses along the smooth skin, her hands sliding down to grasp Kate's hips once more, before sliding lower, her fingers splayed over Kate's bikini-clad ass.

Her skin was on fire, every nerve ending alive and pulsating. It had been years since she'd felt anything like this, needed to touch and be touched with such urgency. It scared her, this loss of control, but at the same time, it was exhilarating.

When their lips met again, their kisses grew slower, more exploratory, as if they had all the time in the world. Vanessa's hands roam, gliding over Kate's sides, memorizing the feel of her, wanting to etch this moment into her memory.

Vanessa's hands slid up the firm curve of Kate's sides, her thumbs brushing the soft underside of Kate's breasts. Kate moaned, a soft, breathy sound that went straight to Vanessa's core, making her ache. She wanted to hear that sound again. Her hands wandered down to the ties of Kate's bikini top, her fingers grazing the bare skin of her lower back. Her thumbs hovered over the knots, wanting, but not daring to untie them. Not yet.

Kate's breath hitched as Vanessa's thumbs brushed the knots, and she pulled back, her eyes searching Vanessa's face. Vanessa couldn't read the expression in those blue eyes.

“What is it?” Vanessa asked. And then a thought occurred to Vanessa. If Kate wasn’t out, maybe she’s never slept with someone? “Is this...” Vanessa took a breath. “Have you...?”

A tiny smile curved Kate’s lips. “Yes, I have.” Kate tucked a strand of hair behind Vanessa’s ear. “I had a friends with benefits situation with my best friend back home for years. She’d come visit me here.” Kate pressed her lips together. “I trusted her with my secret. But it was never a real thing. And she met someone about two years ago so...”

“I didn’t want to assume.” Vanessa’s thumbs brushed along Kate’s hips beneath the water.

Kate’s fingers traced along Vanessa’s jawline, the touch sending shivers through her.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“Can you really think of nothing else when I kiss you?” Vanessa asked as she gave Kate a small smile and raised an eyebrow in silent invitation.

Kate’s response was immediate. Her hands slid down to Vanessa’s neck, pulling her closer. Their lips met again, Kate’s mouth moving with a feverish hunger that matched Vanessa’s own.

Their bodies pressed together as they kissed, Kate’s breasts soft and full against Vanessa’s own, their thighs sliding together. Kate made a small noise in the back of her throat, a sound of pure need that sent a surge of desire right to Vanessa’s core. She rocked her hips forward involuntarily, seeking more friction, wanting to feel Kate everywhere.

Pulling back slightly, Kate’s lips brushed Vanessa’s jaw as she spoke. “I’ve tried not to think about this, about you. But I can’t stop.”

Kate captured Vanessa’s lips again, and Vanessa moaned, her hands tightening on Kate’s curves.

“The photographer’s still out there,” Vanessa whispered as she pulled back a few moments later. She traced Kate’s bottom lip with her thumb, their eyes still locked. “We should go inside.”

It wasn’t a question, but Kate nodded anyway. Slowly, they rose from the jacuzzi, wrapping towels around themselves as they went inside.

Kate's heart pounded as Vanessa led her inside, their fingers intertwined. As they reached the bedroom, Vanessa's towel slipped from her body, falling to the floor with a soft rustle.

Kate drank in the sight of Vanessa standing before her. The one-piece swimsuit clung to her curves, and then Vanessa's hand glided over her shoulder and up to her neck, guiding Kate's lips to hers.

Vanessa's lips were soft yet insistent, her hands gently cupping Kate's face, thumbs brushing against her cheeks. Kate sighed as she deepened the kiss, her hands sliding around Vanessa's waist, pulling her closer.

As Kate kissed Vanessa back, a torrent of emotions surged within her. She felt a heady mix of relief, desire, and exhilaration. Relief that she could finally express her feelings without fear of rejection, desire for the woman she had admired from afar for so long, and exhilaration at the realization that Vanessa's feelings were reciprocated.

Kate's heart raced as she savored the taste of Vanessa's lips, the faint hint of chardonnay lingering on them. She marveled at the softness of Vanessa's skin, the warmth that radiated from her body, and the way her fingers tangled in Kate's hair.

Kate's mind swirled with thoughts of their past encounters, the stolen glances, the brush of their hands, and the lingering touches that had fueled her fantasies. Now, those fantasies were becoming a reality, and Kate couldn't believe it.

Kate's hands roamed over Vanessa's body, exploring the curves and contours that she had only dreamed of touching. Kate broke the kiss, dipping her head to brush her lips against Vanessa's collarbone, slowly moving up her neck.

Vanessa's hands found their way to Kate's waist, her fingers sliding along the edge of her bikini bottoms, drawing out a gasp from deep within Kate. She leaned into

Vanessa, her heart racing, her skin tingling. Then Vanessa's hands moved upward, tracing the curve of Kate's waist before coming to rest on her breasts. Through the thin fabric of her bikini top, Vanessa's fingers teased her nipples, eliciting a moan from Kate.

"Vanessa," Kate panted, her voice thick with desire. She felt a shiver run through her as Vanessa's fingers continued to explore her body, sending waves of pleasure coursing through her.

Vanessa's lips found Kate's again, her kiss deep and passionate. Kate's hands roamed over Vanessa's body, her fingers tracing the curve of her hips and the softness of her skin. She could feel the heat radiating from Vanessa's body, and she knew that she wanted more.

Kate moaned as Vanessa's hands trailed fire down her back, her fingers gripping her bikini-clad bottom with a possessive firmness. The sensation sent a jolt of electricity through her, causing her to arch into Vanessa's touch.

Vanessa's hands slid upwards once more, the pads of her fingers lightly skimming over her skin. Vanessa's fingers worked at the knot in the middle of Kate's back, the simple motion pulsing with an intimacy that made Kate's head spin. The tie loosened, and then Vanessa's hand moved to the knot at the nape of her neck, undoing it with a gentle tug. The fabric of her bikini top fell away.

The loss of the material seemed to heighten every sensation: the softness of Vanessa's fingertips grazing her shoulders, the heat of their bodies pressed together. Vanessa cupped Kate's breast, her thumb circling the sensitive peak. A moan escaped Kate's lips, the sound swallowed by their deepening kiss. Vanessa's touch was confident yet tender, igniting a fire within Kate that threatened to consume her.

Kate's hands, which had been exploring the expanse of Vanessa's back, now moved

to tangle in her damp hair, pulling her impossibly closer. She lost herself in the taste of Vanessa's mouth and the slide of their tongues.

Vanessa's hand continued its sweet torment, her fingers teasing and toying, driving Kate ever closer to the brink. She could feel the heat building within her. Kate's heart raced, her breaths coming in short gasps as Vanessa's continued to tease her.

Kate hooked her fingers under the straps of Vanessa's one-piece swimsuit, her heart pounding in her chest. The fabric was cool and damp, and Kate looked up at Vanessa, her eyes dark with desire. Slowly, she pushed the straps down Vanessa's shoulders, her lips following the path of the descending fabric. She kissed her shoulder, her tongue darting out to taste the salt on Vanessa's skin. Her lips then grazed the swell of Vanessa's chest as she reached the edge of the swimsuit.

With a tenderness that belied her growing hunger, Kate tugged down the damp material, revealing Vanessa's breasts. Kate's heart raced as Vanessa's fingers threaded through her hair, gently tugging her messy bun loose. Her blond waves tumbled down, framing her face as Vanessa's touch sent tingles down her spine.

Vanessa's eyes, dark with desire, held Kate's gaze. Slowly, reverently, Vanessa's fingers combed through the silky strands, her fingertips caressing Kate's scalp. Vanessa sighed, her fingers threading through Kate's hair, guiding her closer. Kate's lips closed around Vanessa's nipple, her tongue circling it as Vanessa moaned. Kate moved to her other breast, taking her nipple into her mouth as she teased her.

And then Kate's mouth traveled lower, her lips tracing a path down Vanessa's stomach. She could feel the muscles quiver under her touch, could hear the catch in Vanessa's breath as she explored her body. The swimsuit pooled at Vanessa's ankles, and Kate helped her step out of it, leaving her gloriously naked.

Kate lowered herself to her knees, her hands gliding over the smooth skin of

Vanessa's hips. She placed a soft kiss on the gentle curve of her mound, her breath fanning over Vanessa's sensitive flesh. Vanessa's fingers tightened in her hair, a wordless plea for more.

With a hunger that had been building, Kate leaned forward, her tongue parting Vanessa's folds. She tasted sweet and musky. It was intoxicating. Kate flicked her tongue over her clit before she came back with slow circles, alternating between them.

Vanessa's hips bucked at the contact, a moan escaping her lips. Encouraged by her response, Kate redoubled her efforts, her tongue circling and teasing the sensitive bundle of nerves. She gripped Vanessa's hips, holding her in place as she pleased her, the sound of Vanessa's moans echoing in the room.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Kate lost herself in the act, each sound, each twitch of Vanessa's body. Her tongue moved with a practiced rhythm, each flick and swirl designed to drive Vanessa wild. She could feel Vanessa's body tense, her fingers clutching at her hair as she neared her release

Kate could feel Vanessa's body tensing, the muscles of her thighs quivering under Kate's touch. But Kate wanted to slow things down.

Reluctantly, Kate pulled back, pressing one last lingering kiss to the soft skin of Vanessa's inner thigh. She looked up at Vanessa, her eyes dark with desire, and slowly rose to her feet.

Vanessa looked dazed, her cheeks flushed with desire, lips parted as she struggled to catch her breath.

Slowly, Kate guided Vanessa back towards the bed, her hands gentle yet firm. She watched as Vanessa's legs hit the edge of the mattress, causing her to sink down onto the plush surface. Kate followed, climbing on top of Vanessa.

Kate's lips found Vanessa's in a searing kiss. Vanessa responded eagerly, her arms wrapping around Kate's neck, pulling her closer. Kate reveled in the feeling of Vanessa's bare skin against her own, the warmth and softness igniting a fire within her.

Breaking the kiss, Kate trailed a path of feather-light kisses down Vanessa's neck. Kate's lips moved lower, tracing the curve of Vanessa's collarbone before dipping down to the swell of her breasts.

Kate got comfortable on her stomach, her body nestled between Vanessa's thighs. She gazed up at Vanessa, silently asking for permission. Vanessa's fingers tangled in Kate's hair, a silent encouragement, and Kate lowered her head, her tongue once again teasing Vanessa's sensitive clit.

Kate varied her rhythm, alternating between long, languid licks and rapid flicks of her tongue. She felt Vanessa's body respond to each change in pace and pressure, her hips arching off the bed, silently begging for more.

As Vanessa's moans grew louder, Kate could feel the tension building in Vanessa's body, the muscles in her thighs trembling as she neared the edge. Kate focused on the small bundle of nerves, her tongue circling Vanessa's clit before she gently sucked on it. The reaction was immediate. Vanessa's body arched off the bed, her groan filling the room as she came undone. Vanessa's hips bucked as she rode the wave of her orgasm, her fingers gripping the sheets tightly, the knuckles turning white.

Kate slowed her movements, her tongue lightly caressing Vanessa's sensitive flesh as she came down from her high. She looked up at Vanessa from between her thighs. Vanessa lay spent on the bed, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

As Vanessa's breathing began to even out, Kate moved to lie beside her, their bodies close but not touching. She watched Vanessa, a small, satisfied smile playing on her lips as she reached out to gently brush a stray lock of nearly black hair from Vanessa's face.

Vanessa reached up, her fingers entwining in Kate's hair as she pulled her down into a kiss. Their lips met with a passion that left no doubt about the depth of their feelings. Kate moaned into the kiss, a sound that was swallowed eagerly by Vanessa's own hungry mouth.

Vanessa's hands were everywhere, tracing the contours of Kate's body, mapping out

her curves with a reverence that sent shivers down Kate's spine. She rolled Kate onto her back, pinning her to the bed with the weight of her body. Kate sighed into the kiss, her hands roaming over Vanessa's back.

Vanessa's hand slipped between Kate's legs, cupping her sex over her bikini bottoms. The heat of Vanessa's palm against the thin, damp fabric, only heightened Kate's desire. Kate's hips bucked involuntarily, pressing herself against Vanessa's hand, seeking more of that delicious friction.

Vanessa broke the kiss, pulling back just enough to look into Kate's eyes. Her voice was low, husky with desire. "You're so beautiful, Kate." Her fingers traced the edge of Kate's bikini bottoms, teasing the sensitive skin there. "I can't get enough of you." Her fingers hooked under the band of Kate's bikini bottoms, tugging them down slowly, revealing the slick heat that awaited her. Kate lifted her hips, helping to remove the last barrier between them.

As Vanessa's fingers finally made contact with her bare skin, Kate couldn't suppress a moan. She was soaking wet, her body aching for Vanessa's touch. Vanessa stroked her with a practiced ease, and Kate didn't think she would last long.

Kate's heart thrummed in her chest. Vanessa's touch was driving her crazy, each stroke, each caress a promise of the pleasure to come, because Vanessa had barely touched her, and Kate thought she might explode. Kate moaned as Vanessa's fingers danced over her, the sensation both maddening and exquisite. She watched Vanessa through half-lidded eyes, their gazes locked.

In Vanessa's eyes, Kate saw a reflection of her own longing, a desire that had simmered beneath the surface of their every interaction.

Vanessa's fingers moved with deliberate slowness, circling her clit with a patience that bordered on cruelty. Kate's hips twitched, a silent plea for more, but Vanessa

held back, drawing out the moment, savoring the control she had over Kate.

Kate's fingers curled into the sheets, her body arching slightly off the bed as Vanessa's touch grew firmer, more insistent. She could feel the tension coiling within her, a tight spring waiting to unleash its energy. The world around them seemed to fade into the background, the only sound in the room was the ragged cadence of their shared breaths.

Vanessa's gaze never wavered from Kate's, her eyes dark with a hunger that mirrored Kate's own. It was as if Vanessa was drinking in every flicker of pleasure that crossed Kate's face, each gasp and moan fueling her own desire.

Kate's lips parted, a breathy moan escaping as Vanessa's fingers finally applied the pressure she craved. The sensation was electric, sending jolts of pleasure radiating throughout her body. Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment, lost in the sensation.

The air between them was charged, the atmosphere thick with anticipation. Kate could feel the heat of Vanessa's body hovering just above her own, the warmth of her breath mingling with the coolness of the room.

Vanessa's fingers continued their sweet torment, each movement calculated to bring Kate closer to the edge. She could feel the mounting pressure, the delicious ache that built with each passing second. Kate's body moved in tandem with Vanessa's touch, her hips rocking in a silent rhythm that begged for release.

And then Vanessa's fingers slipped lower, teasing her entrance before sliding back up to circle her clit once more. The sudden change in sensation drew a sharp gasp from Kate, her body arching off the bed as she chased the pleasure that Vanessa was so close to giving her.

Kate's mind was a haze of desire. Vanessa's name escaped Kate's lips in a breathless

whisper.

And then Vanessa's fingers slipped inside her, and Kate was lost.

The sensation of Vanessa's fingers inside her was almost too much for Kate to bear. Each skilled stroke, each expertly applied pressure sent waves of pleasure crashing over her, drowning her in a sea of ecstasy. Her body moved of its own accord, her hips rocking in rhythm with Vanessa's movements, urging her on, desperate for more.

Kate's breath came in ragged gasps, her heart pounding against her ribcage. She could feel the tension coiling within her, tighter and tighter, like a spring wound to its very limit.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

Vanessa's gaze held hers, those hazel eyes dark with desire, drinking in every flicker of pleasure that crossed Kate's face. Kate could feel the pressure mounting within her, a sweet ache that threatened to consume her whole. She was teetering on the brink, caught in that state of suspension where the only thing that mattered was the next stroke, the next caress, the next wave of pleasure that would finally send her tumbling over the edge.

And then it happened. Vanessa's fingers curled inside her, hitting that perfect spot, and Kate saw stars. Her body convulsed, her back arching off the bed as a cry of pure, unadulterated bliss tore from her lips. The tension that had been building within her shattered into a thousand pieces. She rode the wave of her release, her body shaking, her mind a whirl of sensation and emotion. It was like nothing she had ever experienced before, a connection so deep, so profound. Because this wasn't just sex. This was something else entirely, something that scared her more than she cared to admit.

As the intensity of her orgasm began to ebb, Kate felt Vanessa's fingers slowly withdraw from her. Her body was still trembling, her breath coming in short, sharp pants as she struggled to come back down to earth. She opened her eyes, her gaze meeting Vanessa's, and in that moment, she knew that everything she'd been feeling since she met Vanessa was real.

Vanessa's fingers trailed across Kate's stomach, their tips dancing lightly over the sensitive skin. The sensation sent ripples of pleasure coursing through Kate's body, prolonging the aftershocks of her orgasm. She lay there, basking in the glow of it all, her breath gradually returning to normal.

Vanessa's voice, when she finally spoke, was a soft murmur that filled the space between them. "I shouldn't be surprised that it was like that," she said. "Everything has been electric since we met. Every touch." Her fingers continued their gentle exploration, tracing the outline of Kate's hip bone. "Every look." Kate could still recall the intensity of Vanessa's gaze from across the room, the way it seemed to see right through her. "Every kiss." The memory of their first kiss, spontaneous and unplanned, sent a fresh wave of heat flooding through Kate's veins. "Even when it shouldn't have."

Kate turned her head to look at Vanessa. She knew exactly what Vanessa meant. Their connection had been undeniable from the start, a magnetic pull that neither of them could resist.

Vanessa's hand stilled on Kate's stomach, her thumb making small, soothing circles. "I tried to fight it," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I told myself that you wouldn't feel the same way, that even if you did, it was entirely unprofessional to ask you to do this while I'm secretly wanting you, wanting this." Her gaze held Kate's, a silent promise in the depths of her hazel eyes. "But this is real. It's always been real."

She reached out to caress Vanessa's cheek, her fingers brushing against the soft skin. "I know," Kate said softly. "I've felt all of that too. The guilt. The confusion." Kate held Vanessa's gaze. "It all happened so fast. I was questioning my sanity."

Vanessa's response was a soft smile, her eyes shining with a mixture of emotions. "It's been the same for me," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I told myself it was just the situation we were in, the proximity, that it would pass." Her thumb brushed gently across Kate's cheek. "But it only got stronger."

Kate's heart raced as Vanessa leaned in, their lips meeting in a passionate kiss that sent another wave of desire coursing through her.

Vanessa's lips moved with a deliberate hunger, her hands roaming over the smooth expanse of Kate's skin. The sensation of their bodies entwined, skin against skin, was intoxicating. She kissed Kate hard, conveying the depth of her desire. The words escaped Vanessa's lips, a murmur against Kate's neck, "I want to taste you."

A low moan left Kate's lips at those words, and Kate captured Vanessa's mouth in a hungry kiss.

With a swift motion, Vanessa pushed Kate's hands above her head, pinning them gently but firmly against the pillow. She looked into Kate's eyes. They were clouded with desire and anticipation.

Vanessa traced a path down Kate's body with her tongue, each lick and kiss a promise of the pleasure to come. She lingered at the hollow of Kate's throat, feeling the pulse quicken beneath her lips. Kate's breathing hitched as Vanessa's mouth continued its sweetly torturous journey, her body arching into the touch, seeking more.

Vanessa let go of Kate's hands and reached up to untie her hair, letting the waves cascade around her shoulders, loving the way that Kate looked up at her, like she was the sexiest woman Kate had ever seen.

Vanessa leaned down, pressing her lips to Kate's in a searing, possessive kiss. There was a newfound boldness in her touch, a confidence that came from knowing that Kate wanted this as much as she did.

Vanessa kissed her way down Kate's naked body, savoring every inch of her skin. She traced the curve of Kate's hip with her tongue, then moved lower, kissing the soft flesh of her inner thigh. Kate moaned softly, her hips bucking slightly as Vanessa's

mouth moved closer to her core. When Vanessa reached Kate's most sensitive spot, she paused for a moment, looking up at Kate with a hungry gaze. She could see the desire burning in Kate's eyes, and it only fueled her own passion. With a flick of her tongue, Vanessa parted the folds of Kate's sex and began to explore.

Kate gasped as Vanessa's tongue made contact with her clit. With each moan that escaped Kate's lips, Vanessa felt a surge of empowerment. Kate's hips bucked as Vanessa's tongue darted out, tasting her fully for the first time. Vanessa took her time, her movements slow and deliberate.

As Kate's climax approached, her body tensed, her breaths coming in short, sharp gasps. Vanessa watched her, captivated by the play of emotions across Kate's face, the surrender to pleasure, the trust placed in Vanessa's hands. Kate's hand was lost in Vanessa's hair, fisting it as she came, her hips rocking against Vanessa with a delicious, low moan on her lips.

Vanessa watched as Kate caught her breath, her eyes shut, one hand thrown above her head, the other lost in Vanessa's hair now. Vanessa made her way back up, pressing soft kisses along Kate's flushed skin. She settled beside her, brushing a strand of Kate's hair away from her face.

Kate's eyes fluttered open and then her lips found Vanessa's in a languid, exploratory kiss. Vanessa moaned into the kiss, her body humming with need, aching for more. She felt Kate's hand trail down her side, the touch light but purposeful. With a sudden shift, Kate rolled on top, straddling Vanessa with an eagerness that made Vanessa's pulse race. Their eyes locked as Kate's hips began to rock against her own, the friction sending jolts of pleasure through Vanessa's body.

Vanessa's hands roamed over Kate's body, gripping her hips, guiding her movements. She matched Kate's rhythm, their bodies moving in sync, each roll of their hips bringing them closer to the edge. Vanessa groaned as Kate's pressed

harder.

Kate's movements became more frenzied, her hips grinding harder against Vanessa's. Vanessa's climax was building, her body tensing in anticipation. She clung to Kate, her fingernails digging into the soft flesh of her back.

Vanessa came first, her orgasm washing over her in powerful, relentless waves. Kate collapsed on top of Vanessa as she came, grinding her hips slowly as she drew out every bit of pleasure.

Vanessa held Kate close, stroking her hair gently. Her body was still humming as Kate's head rested against Vanessa's chest, their legs entwined. Vanessa savored the weight of Kate in her arms, the way their bodies fit together so perfectly.

Vanessa's fingers traced lazy patterns along Kate's back as they caught their breath. When she got here today, she'd been so nervous, not sure of how to handle the realization that she had very real feelings for Kate, but it turned out that Kate knew exactly how that felt.

A smile tugged at Vanessa's lips as Kate lifted her head to meet her eyes.

"What are you thinking?" Kate asked as she rolled off Vanessa and got comfortable beside her, pushing her hair over her shoulder.

Vanessa's gaze traced the delicate features of Kate's face, taking in the flushed cheeks and the way her lips were still slightly parted.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“I’m thinking about how beautiful you are,” Vanessa murmured, her thumb caressing Kate’s cheek.

A shy smile tugged at the corners of Kate’s mouth. “I feel like I’m dreaming,” she whispered.

Vanessa couldn’t resist the temptation of those soft lips. She leaned in, capturing Kate’s mouth in a tender, lingering kiss. Kate sighed against her, melting into Vanessa’s embrace.

22

Kate woke to the warmth of the sun on her skin and the subtle weight of Vanessa’s arm draped across her middle. She wanted to stay in this moment, lingering on the memories of the night before. As her gaze drifted to the side, she found Vanessa still asleep, her dark hair splayed across the pillow in messy waves. In the quiet of the morning, Kate allowed herself a moment to simply admire Vanessa’s beauty.

Memories of the previous night flooded Kate’s mind, sending a delicious shiver down her spine. The way Vanessa had moaned beneath her touch, her body arching into Kate’s with a desperate need. The way she had come undone so easily, her cries of pleasure echoing through the room. The chemistry between them had been electric.

Vanessa stirred, her eyelashes fluttering open as she gradually woke. The early morning light played across Vanessa’s features, highlighting the elegant lines of her face and the soft curve of her lips.

Vanessa's eyes opened fully, meeting Kate's gaze. For a heartbeat, neither moved nor spoke. Kate reached out tentatively, her fingers brushing a strand of hair away from Vanessa's face. Vanessa leaned into the touch, her eyes closing briefly as if savoring the connection. When she opened them again, there was a softness there that made Kate's heart ache.

"Good morning," Vanessa murmured, her voice husky and thick with sleep.

"Morning." Kate felt a rush of warmth spread through her chest. "Did you sleep okay?"

Vanessa stretched slightly, her arm tightening around Kate for a brief moment before relaxing again. "Better than I have in weeks," she admitted.

Kate felt a flush rise to her cheeks, pleased but unsure how to respond. She searched Vanessa's gaze, looking for any hint of regret or second thoughts, but it wasn't there.

"Me too," Kate finally said, the words barely above a whisper. She wanted to say more, to express everything she was feeling, but the words seemed to stick in her throat.

Vanessa's fingers traced lazy patterns on Kate's stomach, and the simple touch sent a tingling sensation across her skin. The sound of birds chirping outside reminded Kate of where they were, of what this weekend was supposed to be. She opened her eyes and found Vanessa watching her with an intensity that made her heart race.

"Are you hungry?" Vanessa asked.

"Starving," she said with a small laugh. "But I don't want to move."

Kate watched as Vanessa shifted, propping herself up on one elbow. The sheet

slipped down, and Kate could only stare.

“Why don’t we eat something, and then...” Vanessa’s voice dropped lower, her fingertips dancing along Kate’s collarbone. “Come right back here.”

The suggestion sent heat coursing through Kate’s body. She studied Vanessa’s face, taking in the playful glint in her eyes, the slight quirk of her lips. This wasn’t the polished, composed Vanessa Prescott that the world knew. This was someone else entirely, and Kate knew she was falling so hard for this version of Vanessa.

23

Kate’s weight pressed against Vanessa’s side, her body radiating warmth through the thick blanket draped across them. The living room lights dimmed to a soft glow, casting shadows across Kate’s features as she scrolled through movie options on the screen.

Vanessa breathed in the faint scent of Kate’s shampoo as her arm curved around Kate’s shoulder.

“What about this one?” Kate tilted her head up, her blue eyes bright with anticipation.

“Mm, seen it.” Vanessa shifted, pulling Kate closer. The leather couch creaked beneath them. “Though I wouldn’t mind watching it again.”

As Kate continued to flick through the movie options, Vanessa found herself distracted by the curve of her neck, the way her hair fell in soft waves over her shoulders. Unable to resist, she leaned in and pressed a tender kiss to the sensitive skin just below Kate’s ear.

A breathy laugh escaped her lips. “You’re not making this easy, you know,” she

teased, tilting her head to give Vanessa better access even as she complained.

“Mmm, sorry,” Vanessa murmured against her skin, not sounding sorry at all. Her hands slid beneath the blanket, finding the smooth expanse of Kate’s stomach and tracing idle patterns there.

Kate shivered at the touch, her focus on the TV screen wavering. “If you keep that up, we’ll never pick a movie,” she warned, but there was no real admonishment in her tone.

Vanessa smiled, nuzzling into the crook of Kate’s neck. “Would that be so bad?” she asked, her voice low and sultry. “I can think of plenty of other ways to spend our evening...”

Kate whimpered, and she turned to capture Vanessa’s lips in a slow, deep kiss. The remote slipped from her hand, forgotten, as she twisted in Vanessa’s arms, the blanket tangling around them. Vanessa lost herself in the taste of Kate, in the feel of her body pressed close.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

The insistent vibration of Vanessa's phone against the coffee table broke through the haze of desire. She pulled back from Kate's lips with a sigh, glancing over at the screen. Elliot's name flashed up at her, demanding attention.

Vanessa hesitated, her finger hovering over the screen. But then Kate's hand was on her cheek, turning her face back towards her, and the decision was made. She let the call go to voicemail, leaning in to capture Kate's lips once more.

The kiss was slower this time, deeper. Vanessa lost herself in the sensation of Kate's mouth moving against hers, the soft slide of their tongues. She tangled her fingers in Kate's hair, holding her close.

But then Kate was pulling away, a furrow between her brows. "Should we tell Elliot?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "About us? About this being...real?"

Vanessa's heart stalled in her chest as she searched Kate's face in the dim light. "Do you really want this?" Vanessa's fingers stilled against Kate's skin. "All of it. The age difference, the media, the way we started."

Kate's palm pressed warm against Vanessa's cheek, her thumb brushing along her skin. "I want every single part of it." Kate's voice rang with conviction, each word deliberate and clear.

Kate leaned in, slowly closing the distance between them. Her breath ghosted across Vanessa's lips, a whisper of anticipation that made Vanessa's pulse quicken. When their lips finally met, the touch was feather-light, teasing.

“Even how we started...” Kate murmured between kisses. “Maybe it wasn’t perfect, but it led us here. And I wouldn’t change that for anything.”

Vanessa’s chest tightened at Kate’s words, at the raw honesty in her voice. She pulled Kate closer, eliminating the space between them. Their lips met again, and this time Vanessa poured everything she couldn’t say into the kiss - her fears, her hopes, her growing certainty that this was more than she’d ever dreamed possible.

Kate’s hands slipped beneath Vanessa’s shirt, fingertips dancing across her ribs. The touch sparked electricity through her body, igniting every nerve ending. Vanessa arched into the contact, deepening the kiss until they were both breathless.

Vanessa’s heart thundered against her ribs as Kate’s hands traced higher, leaving trails of fire across her skin. The forgotten TV cast shifting shadows across Kate’s face.

Kate’s lips found that sensitive spot below Vanessa’s ear, and rational thought scattered. Vanessa’s fingers tangled in Kate’s hair, pulling her back up to capture her mouth in a searing kiss.

The blanket slipped to the floor as Kate shifted, straddling Vanessa’s lap. Their kisses grew deeper, more urgent. Vanessa’s hands slid under Kate’s shirt, mapping the smooth expanse of her back, wanting to memorize every inch.

Kate broke the kiss. “Bedroom?” she whispered against Vanessa’s lips.

“Here,” Vanessa breathed, pulling Kate back down to her.

The last rays of sunlight painted the Santa Monica sky in shades of orange and pink.

Kate didn't think she'd ever get tired of the view from her deck.

Arms slid around her waist from behind. Vanessa pressed against her back, her chin resting on Kate's shoulder. Kate's skin tingled where Vanessa touched her, the same electric response she'd felt all weekend. Her breath caught as Vanessa's fingers splayed across her stomach.

Kate closed her eyes, savoring the warmth of Vanessa's body against hers. The weekend at the cabin had changed everything, and Kate still couldn't believe this was happening, that Vanessa felt the same way about her.

She turned in Vanessa's arms, meeting those mesmerizing hazel eyes that now held such tenderness.

Vanessa's phone buzzed in her pocket. With a slight frown, she reached between them to retrieve it, glancing at the screen.

"It's Elliot," she said, her thumb hovering over the answer button. "And it's a video call." She took a deep breath. "We can't keep ignoring him."

Kate nodded, and Vanessa answered the call, turning slightly so that Kate remained in the frame.

Elliot's face filled the screen. His eyes lit up as he took in the sight of them together. "Look at you two. All cozy and always in character. I love it," he said, his voice filled with enthusiasm. "The photos from the weekend in the jacuzzi? I don't know how you two keep outdoing yourselves. I take it you had a relaxing weekend away?"

Kate glanced at Vanessa, a silent understanding passing between them. Vanessa cleared her throat, drawing Elliot's attention back to her.

“Elliot, we have something to tell you,” Vanessa said.

Elliot waited, his eyebrows raised in anticipation.

“We’re together,” Kate said, the words tumbling out in a rush. “For real.”

Vanessa chimed in. “After this weekend, neither of us are pretending.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Elliot’s face erupted into a smile so wide it seemed to stretch beyond the confines of the screen. His eyes sparkled with joy, and he let out a whoop of delight that startled Kate, making her jump slightly in Vanessa’s arms.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:50 pm

“I knew it!” Elliot exclaimed, his voice rising with each word. “I knew there was something special between you two! Oh, this is fantastic! I’m so happy for you both!”

He clasped his hands together, bouncing slightly in his seat as if he could barely contain his excitement. Kate couldn’t help but smile at his enthusiasm, feeling a warmth spread through her chest. Vanessa’s arm tightened around her waist, and Kate leaned into the embrace.

“Obviously, this changes things,” Kate said.

“I understand completely,” Elliot said, his voice softening from its earlier excitement. “I’m stepping down.” He held up his hand in mock surrender.

Kate watched as Vanessa’s expression softened, her eyes misting over as she looked at their agent through the phone screen.

“Thank you,” Vanessa said, her voice thick with emotion. “For everything.” She paused, her fingers finding Kate’s and interlacing them. “If you hadn’t suggested this whole arrangement... Kate and I might never have gotten to know each other.”

Kate’s chest tightened at Vanessa’s words. She remembered that first dinner, how nervous she’d been sitting across from her idol, trying to hide years of admiration. Now here they were, together on her deck, holding hands while talking to their agent. The universe had a strange way of working things out.

“Oh, stop it. Seeing you both happy is all the thanks I need.” He dabbed at the corner of his eye. “Now, I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone. Talk soon!”

Vanessa smiled as she hung up and slide her phone back into her pocket. Kate turned back toward the sunset, Vanessa's arms wrapping around her once more. The last remnants of daylight painted the horizon in deep purples and golds, the ocean a dark mirror reflecting the fading colors. A cool breeze swept across the deck, carrying the salt air, and Kate pressed back into Vanessa's warmth.

"I never thought I'd be standing here with you like this," Kate whispered, her fingers trailing along Vanessa's forearms.

Vanessa's lips brushed against her neck.

Kate turned in Vanessa's embrace, reaching up to cup her face. Everything about this moment felt perfect. The gentle crash of waves, the way Vanessa looked at her.

"Stay tonight?" Kate asked, her thumb ghosting across Vanessa's jaw.

Vanessa's gaze searched hers. "I'd love to."

Hand in hand, they turned from the darkening sky and headed inside, leaving the last of the sunset behind them, their story now entirely their own.