



Meet Stan

Author: *Laura Olsen*

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Meeting your new billionaire boss sounds exciting... Until he turns out to be your unforgettable one-night stand from yesterday. Next day he summons me to his office and tells me that he wants me... ...he wants me to be his fake girlfriend to prove that no one can tell fake love from the real thing. I don't even have to sleep with him... but I kind of want to. I need the money to help my parents, but I feel that the price is too high. He is the ultimate bosshole playboy and I really hate the day I met Stan, the Billionaire

Total Pages (Source): 76

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

Chapter One

Stan

The jazz pianist tickled the ivories with long, slender fingers as I moped about the nearby buffet table, holding a half-eaten cracker with a smear of caviar on the end. The best type of caviar, sturgeon straight from one specific lake in Russia, and I could barely even taste it.

The pianist was tearing it up, too. His backup ensemble were equally as skilled. The guy on bass, a great big wedge of a man like a living teddy bear, practically made love to his instrument. A bass violin kind of does look like a woman, with curves and all.

This fabulous soiree was organized to commemorate the firm's acquisition of Dynamic Mechanics, a bleeding-edge tech firm focused on microprocessors and other essential hardware of the computerized future.

It was a hell of a coup, and we were folding in hundreds of employees into our existing firm structure. Now that DM was a division of our firm, this meant that a good portion of the people at the party were total strangers to me.

But where some saw awkwardness, I saw an opportunity. There were all kinds of fresh young females there for the taking, yet I felt an odd melancholy weighing down my body and mind.

A tall, mustachioed man hovered nearby, a glass of champagne in his hand.

“You look entirely too glum for a man who just got a whole lot richer.”

I glanced over at Chandler, my friend and business partner, and shrugged.

“I’m fine. Just thinking.”

“About what?”

To be honest, I was thinking about the fact that I was the sole remaining bachelor at the firm, and what that meant for all of our futures. There were four of us, owners and executives, but their wives now played an increasing role in management. I wasn’t about to bring that up to Chandler, since he might take it the wrong way.

“About the fact that you and Jon and Mason are shit out of luck tonight.” I grinned ear to ear, though I really didn’t feel it. “I mean, just look at all the beautiful ladies here. Tonight is an endless adventure—for me.”

I gave him a look and shook my head as if I was very sad for him.

“But what do you guys have to look forward to? Some tasty hors d’oeuvres? A few glasses of champagne before you have to go home to wifey?” I heaved a sigh. “I cry for you, but my tears are from laughter.”

Chandler patted me on the shoulder. “Chin up, you’ll find your missing piece someday.”

“Fuck Shel Silverstein, fuck the end of the sidewalk, and fuck you, now that I think about it.” I threw back a glass of champagne and headed for the balcony. “I need some fresh air.”

Chandler’s laughter only made it worse as I retreated. It wasn’t mocking laughter.

That kind of ribbing I can deal with. No, it was knowing laughter. Like he was privy to something I wasn't.

In fact, all of my partners had been acting funny ever since they got married. It was something I'd tried not to think about but grew harder to deal with every day.

The balcony doors closed behind me and I took in the fantastical sight of the New York skyline. Nearby, a pigeon strutted like a conqueror on the marble railing. I decided to name him Ted. He looked like a Ted.

"I tell you what, Ted." I heaved a sigh as I looked out on the city. "It sucks being the lone bachelor in the firm. A few years back, we worked all day and partied all night long."

I slapped my palm on the railing, which startled Ted and made him jump back on his bright orange feet.

"All night long, I'm telling you. I can't count how many bars we shut down or got kicked out of. Now, though, if I wanted to go out, I had to do it by myself. I mean, I can get any woman I want. It just lost some meaning when I had no one to brag or show off to."

I looked over at him and sighed.

"You're lucky you're just a pigeon, Ted. You don't want to deal with life's changes as a human being."

Ted cooed at me, twisting his flexible neck around to stare. His head cocked this way and that, and then he took off in a furious profusion of fluttering. A single feather drifted down and I caught it out of the air.

“Son of a bitch, look at that. Some cultures believe that if you catch a feather out of the air, then you get to make a wish.”

I stared at the feather in my hand for a long time.

“Too bad I don’t believe in that bullshit.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

I tossed the feather over the balcony, but before it left my fingers a stray thought crossed my mind. I thought it would be nice for things to change. I didn't want to wish for my buddies getting divorced, but I could wish for my own boredom to end.

The wind caught the feather and bore it away. I watched it flutter down until it grew so small as to be out of sight. I thanked Ted silently for his wise discourse, and headed back into the party.

I was more determined than ever to find some fine piece of ass, a distraction to keep me from feeling lonely tonight. Unfortunately, my search was disrupted when Mason sidled up to me.

"Hey, Chandler said you've got a horseshoe up your ass about something. I came to help."

"I'm fine, Mason." I ignored him, staring around the room and searching for a target. "I'm busy, so if you don't mind, let me zero in on tonight's conquest."

"I see." Mason chuckled. "What about the blonde in the corner?"

I glanced that way. Sure, she was attractive, but I just wasn't feeling it.

"High maintenance chick with makeup thick. Hard pass."

"Okay," Mason gestured near the piano, where a black-haired beauty tried not to spill out of her evening gown. Tried and somewhat failed. I could see an edge of the areola on her plunging neckline.

“Who, the queen of the undead there? Shit, I don’t want to hook up in a graveyard or read Sandman comics for fuck’s sake. I just want to have sex with a gorgeous woman.”

“I think it’s obvious you’re going to find something wrong with whoever I pick out, so I’m going to stop now.” Mason offered a wan smile. “I don’t know what you’re looking for, Stan the Man, but I hope you find it.”

“Fucking prick,” I muttered to myself as I turned back to the buffet table. “I’d like to—”

I ran right into her, spilling drinks down the front of her black dress. Her perfectly formed lips formed an O as a gasp escaped from her throat. My eyes fixed on her deep umber eyes, limpid pools I fell into and never hit the bottom.

“Oh,” she cried.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I’m so sorry. I should have been paying attention to where I was going.”

I took out a handkerchief, and almost wiped her chest before I realized that would probably work against me. I offered it to her instead as nimble, fleet-footed staff came to clean up the mess.

“Hey, no worries,” she said in a definite Brooklyn accent. “I was staring at my cell phone instead of where I was walking.”

“But your dress,” I said, feeling a heel. I knew quality when I saw it, and that was one quality little black dress. It hugged her curves without giving too much away, unlike the queen of the undead earlier. Her auburn hair flashed in the light, cascading other hues as she moved.

“Ah, it’s white wine on a black dress, I think I’m good.”

She flashed a smile at me.

“Listen, I feel terrible. If you send me a dry-cleaning bill—”

She burst into laughter.

“Believe me, I got that covered, man.”

“Are you sure?”

“Fuhgeddaboutit.”

I joined her in a smile.

“Fair enough, then. Listen, can I at least replace the drink I made you spill?”

“Sure,” she said, pronouncing it ‘shore.’ I was getting a definite “lower class” vibe from her, but she wore Prada and walked in heels like she’d been born in them. A little bit of class mixed with a glorious lack of sophistication.

Now why in the hell did I find that so appealing?

I figured she was from the DM company we’d just acquired. It would explain why I’d never seen her around the office, though I’ll admit I hardly knew everybody on sight. The firm employed a lot of people.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

I replaced her glass of wine, got myself a bourbon on the rocks, and decided to make my play.

“So, it’s hard to imagine a gorgeous woman like yourself being at this soiree alone.”

“Oh, is it?” her eyes flashed at me, a slight smile tugging the corners of her thick, sensuous lips. She was just everything, the total package of sweetness with a nice spicy kick of street smarts. I felt the all too familiar thrill of the hunt. “How do you know I don’t have a boyfriend?”

“I don’t.” I gave her a little shrug. “But I’m interested enough to risk the embarrassing awkwardness to take a shot, anyway.”

“You think you can keep up with me?” She cocked an eyebrow.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that most of you Wall Street types are kind of bland and boring. I mean, my last boyfriend was a theater major who dressed up like Don Quixote and serenaded me with love poetry he wrote himself, so the bar is kind of high.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Ah, but seeing as he’s your ex-boyfriend, it must not have been enough.” I moved in a bit closer and stroked my finger along her arm. She didn’t shy away and offered me a sly smile before taking a sip of champagne. “And as far as us Wall Street types go, let’s just say I’m more adventurous than most.”

“So is that what I am to you? An adventure waiting to happen?”

I couldn't tell if she was offended or not. I chose my next words tactfully, as if I were on a billion-dollar negotiation.

“I prefer to think of it as if we'd be going on an adventure together.”

She relaxed and looked at me from under lidded eyes. The smoky dark purple shadow she had chosen really made her eyes pop. I again felt as if I were being drawn into them, as inexorably as the sun rises.

“Good answer. Ivy.”

“Stan,” I replied, taking her hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

She gestured toward the balcony terrace. “Want to get out of here? Whenever I hear jazz music it sounds like a bunch of people playing different songs at the same time.”

“Of course.” I chuckled as I led her toward the balcony. “I don't share your opinions on jazz, but I can respect them. I'm the same way about that music where people scream at the top of their lungs and sound like the cookie monster.”

She cackled and tugged the door open for me, which was a surprise. Was she making a statement, or did she really date such low-class bums that wouldn't hold a door for a lady?

“So,” I said as we stared out over the city. “What do you like to do for fun?”

“Make money,” she said without hesitation. “Do what you love, right? But a close second would probably involve more adult-oriented activities...”

“I like to make money too,” I said softly, leaning in close. “But I like making love even more...”

I took her lips, then, and they tasted as sweet as ambrosia. My heart thudded in my chest, my body strained to reach her through the fabric of my suit. Every fiber of my being wanted to take her, to make her mine for the rest of that fiery evening.

After that kiss, the rest of the party went a lot better—so I’m told. I’m afraid I missed the rest of it because of Ivy’s company.

Chapter Two

Ivy

I don’t know why they scheduled the big DM acquisition party for a weeknight, but I do know that it turned out to be very inconvenient. I made this realization about seven AM when my alarm went off. I think I’d slept about three hours, tops.

A smile came to my lips even though I was tired. The memory of Stranger Stan and I hooking up in a supply room sprang easily to the surface. I was the last woman to just hook up with some guy I’d never met before at a party, but for some reason it felt right to sneak off with Stan.

I figured I deserved a red hot hookup, given how hard I worked. As a junior accounting analyst at the firm, I had a quota to get through every day. I often exceeded that quota, however, because I had ambitions far beyond my tiny cubicle.

Recently, I’d had one of those career-making moments. I’d detected an accounting error that could have cost the firm millions of dollars. One decimal place to the left, and we’d have wasted both time and money.

My accounting catch hadn't gone unnoticed. I got called up to the office of the Chief Financial Officer, Chandler. He gave me a pat on the back and promised big things in store for me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

Then I hadn't heard anything else from him. I figured maybe he was busy with the acquisition of DM, which stood to reason. I'd begun to put it out of my mind. It was going to look nice on a resume, but I wasn't expecting to move into upper management anytime soon.

I picked a shirt with a high collar, to hide the hickeys Stan had left on me. What a wild man. I smiled as I checked my lipstick. Things were looking up for me, even if my heroic act of accounting had been forgotten all too soon.

I caught the train to work, yawning into my coffee as I tried to come to life. New Yorkers are the hardest-working people on the planet. I wasn't the only one having trouble staying awake while downing caffeinated beverages. The struggle is real.

I got to work and rode the elevator up to the fifteenth floor, where my office was. I smiled at Deb, one of the other office accounting drones, as I entered.

"Hey, there you are." Deb's blue eyes flashed with hidden knowledge. I stopped and gave her a look.

"What do you mean, here I am? I'm twenty minutes early." I checked the clock on the wall just to verify, and found out I was right.

"Oh, it's just that I've been given specific instructions by none other than the CFO himself."

My heart skipped a beat. Was I about to be fired? Why?

“And what were those instructions?”

“That you are to immediately report up to his office on the sixty-ninth floor.”

“Did he happen to mention why?”

“No, but it has to be something really good, or something really bad.” Deb’s brows arched high on her face. “Maybe even both.”

I put my hand on my hip and scowled at her.

“How did you figure all of this out?”

“Oh, it’s simple.” Deb’s eyes grew distant. “Number one, if you’d done something only sort of good, you’d have gotten a thank you memo. On the other hand if you’d done something bad, you’d just get a pink slip.”

I sighed and turned around to fill a cone of water from the nearby cooler. A big bubble rolled up to the top and let out a belch as it erupted to the surface.

“Number two,” Deb said as if I wasn’t exasperated. “If you’d done something really bad, like really bad, you’d get called up to the office and likely escorted from the building by security. Or police. Conversely, if you’d done something really amazingly good, then he could be giving you a promotion.”

“I think it’s best not to speculate at all,” I said. “It could be something really simple, like a bit of paperwork I have to fill out.”

“Then why wouldn’t you be doing that at HR?”

I had no good answer for that. I just drank my ice-cold water and headed upstairs

while trying to maintain an ice-cold heart. I had to admit that Deb's words had gotten to me. I had a feeling that whatever was about to happen, good or bad, it would change my life forever.

I got off the elevator on the sixty-ninth floor. It felt weird up there. I seldom left my own office during the workday. Everyone seemed to be in a great big hurry. Nobody stopped to gossip, and I gaped as one of the firm's founders, Jonathon "Tiger" Thomas, strode by rapidly while juggling two phones and as many conversations in as many languages.

In a weird way, I felt like Dorothy when she landed in Oz. Only I felt like I was the one with a house sitting on my chest.

I found my way to Chandler's office. I had been there maybe once before, when I'd first been hired. The assistant let me in and I gaped at how freaking huge his office was. I mean, fuck, you could fit two bodegas, a donut shop, and a decent-sized deli in there.

I decided that whatever was about to happen, I was going to meet it head-on like a true Brooklynite. So I strode up to the desk with a confident swagger and smiled.

"Hey, boss, I heard you wanted to see me?"

"I did, yes." Chandler stood up upon my entry, as did his lovely wife, the creator of one of our most successful pieces of IP, the Riverwind universe. "You remember my wife, June?"

"Yes, of course. How ya doing?"

"I'm fine, thanks," she said, shaking my hand.

By mutual unspoken agreement, we all sat down. Chandler folded his hands on his desk and fixed me with a frank gaze.

“All right, we’re all very busy people so I’m going to cut to the chase. We’ve been very impressed with the work you’ve done for us so far. Not just the error in the Forrester account, though that was a huge deal. Your working late and coming in early, and your meticulous attention to detail have not gone unnoticed.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“You’ve done a good job,” June said with a wink. “That’s what all that corporate mumbo jumbo my husband just spouted comes down to.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it. It was nice to be recognized for doing a good job in one’s field.

“You deserve it—and more.” Chandler’s brows rose on his eyes, and his tone changed subtly. “If there’s one thing an organization growing as fast as our own needs, it’s leadership. I think you would make a fine addition to our management team—but the fact remains you’re a recent hire, and still a junior analyst.”

“I understand.” I shifted in my seat. Was this just another attaboy pat on the back session? I remembered what my father told me once.

A pat on the back is just two feet from a kick in the ass.

“So if we were to promote you cold turkey, there might be some growing pains—not to mention brewing resentment among the more senior staff. So, I thought the best way for you to get a management role with this company is for you to prove your mettle managing a project or two.”

“You—you want me to manage a project?” I blurted.

“Or two.” Chandler typed on his keyboard, and then clicked his mouse. “There, I’ve sent you the details on the Mastercraft project.”

“Mastercraft? That’s the beer brand the firm acquired a couple of months ago, right?”

I remembered it coming across my screen at some point.

“That’s the one. My colleague Mr. Timmons took it upon himself to expand the brand’s image and market share. He really thinks there’s a market for, and I quote ‘microbrew quality in macro brew quantity.’”

“I’ll have to get a consultation with my dad. He loves beer.”

Chandler and June laughed, but his face soon grew somber once more.

“I’m not going to lie, working with Mr. Timmons is going to be a chore. He is a business genius, but, as many creative people do, he thinks that he can’t be bothered with mundane details. Deadlines, budget constraints, things that are as important as genius ideas. Specifically, he likes to hemorrhage money on projects to get what he wants. You have to remain firm, and use your best judgment to ensure that we stay within budget.”

“Isn’t Mr. Timmons one of my bosses?” I asked. I’d never met the man, but only knew him by reputation. Real ladies man and lothario, if you catch my drift.

“Yes, and no. You’ll have the ultimate say on all financial matters relating to the project.”

So I have all of the responsibility and none of the power. Still, I wanted to meet this challenge. I knew that this was a huge test, but also a huge vote of confidence. I was determined not to fail.

“So,” Chandler said. “What do you think? Is this going to be a good fit for you?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” I smiled at him. “But I’d love the opportunity to find out. I promise to give it my all.”

“That’s good enough for me.” Chandler stood up, and I did as well. We shook hands firmly. “Now, your salary isn’t going to change, at least not now, but project managers get a percentage bonus based on the relative success of the overall project. I can’t promise you anything overnight, and Rome was not built in a day, but this could be the start of much bigger things for you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. I’ll do my best not to let you down.”

“Great.” Chandler gestured at his office door. “If you’ve got a moment, I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Timmons since he’s so heavily involved in this project.”

“Sounds great.”

I accompanied him out into the hall and halfway around the building. He rapped on the door to an office and then peered inside.

“Hey, Samantha, is Stan in?”

Wait, Stan? No way. Impossible. Has to be different guys, same name.

I followed Chandler inside with mounting trepidation. We got buzzed into Mr. Timmons’ office, and I got a look at him at last.

Son of a bitch. Same devilishly handsome face, same three hundred dollar haircut. Same chiseled physique a suit just couldn’t hide.

It was the same Stan I’d hooked up with at the soiree the night before.

Fate, it seems, is not without a sense of humor. And that fickle bitch was laughing her ass off at me.

Chapter Three

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

Stan

I wasn't a guy into repeat performances, if you catch my drift. None of my instincts were honed for that sort of thing. I didn't ask Ivy for her phone number, and I never learned her last name. Standard operating procedure for Stan the Man, the Myth, the Legend.

I'd done the same thing more times than I could possibly remember or count. But for the first time, on the morning after the soiree and my hot as hell hookup, I felt regret. My first thought upon waking was that I would probably never see her again, and that felt like a shame.

Once my brain came online, I admonished myself for those thoughts. What was it Jonathon used to say before he met Amelia? Oh yeah. I don't get soft spots for women. I only get one hard spot.

That was to be my mantra. I would be the holdout, the last man standing, the only bachelor left in the firm if I had to be. After all, love was just a chemical reaction in the brain.

You got 'hooked' on certain people, and your dopamine levels went up when they were around. Simple biology. I didn't want to get hooked on any one woman. I wanted to be free to roam as I pleased, like I'd told Chandler and Mason the night before.

I got up and did the three S combinations that men require to feel functional in society. The shit, the shave, and the shower. I have a thousand-dollar wet dry razor,

so I handle the second two at the same time.

Once out of the shower, I paused to check out my reflection in the mirror. The Russian twists I'd added to my routine made my midsection look a bit bulky. I resolved to cut back on them while increasing work on my transverse abdominals.

It wasn't vanity—okay, it wasn't JUST vanity. If you're successful, as I was without a doubt, people expected you to look successful. In ancient times that used to mean being fat with a proper double chin, to show you had access to surplus resources.

In the modern era, I'd aligned myself with the fitness geeks and worked hard to maintain my body. I found myself wondering what Ivy would think if she got the chance to see me naked. We'd done it hard, over a bench, up against a wall, but had remained mostly clothed the whole time.

Thinking about my hookup the day after in all the wrong ways felt weird, but I figured it was just a bit of infatuation. That was all. I could get her out of my head soon enough. For the time being, I needed to focus on work. Chandler was supposed to be introducing me to a new project manager I was going to work with while he was away on paternity leave.

I wasn't looking forward to it. I'd heard it was some kind of workaholic, number-crunching nerd chick who got lucky and caught a massive accounting error. Worse, when people talked about her, they always praised her intelligence and I figured her high level of skill at her job virtually guaranteed we were going to butt heads. A lot of this belief had to do with the nature of the project itself: Mastercraft Beer and Ale.

In order to fully appreciate why the Mastercraft project was so near and dear to me, we have to spin back the clock to my college years. A couple of my fraternity brothers wanted to create a microbrew, and tap it at homecoming. So far, so good.

Only their sour, salty-ass beer was terrible, But it was a good experience, because at that same brewery I ran into Chocolate Chip Charlie. Charlie used to own a bakery for thirty years, which he eventually sold to get his dream of starting a brewery off the ground.

At that point, he was doing microbrew batches, but it was the best damn beer I'd ever had. Probably the perfect balance of flavor, boldness, and a head so thick you could balance a quarter on it.

I vowed that someday, when I made my fortune, I would look up Chocolate Chip Charlie and finance his brewery dreams.

Alas, when I made my first billion and decided to look up Charlie, he was already dead. I did speak with his son, Charlie Jr., who had built the microbrew into a modest market share but high prestige. Their beers and ales won a lot of awards, but they didn't move a lot of product.

I vowed to change all of that. I'd finally acquired a controlling share in the brewery, after months of negotiation, and I wanted to expand, expand, expand. I believed in the product and the family dynasty behind it.

The problem is, the beer market was crowded as hell. It's always crowded, and getting a foothold requires publicity as much as expert brewing techniques. I knew that the firm was going to have to spend a lot of money on promotion, and that always irks the bean counters like Chandler—and by proxy, his little minion of a project manager.

I headed into work and rode the elevator up to my office, hoping things would go smoothly. I had a lot tied up in the brewery, not just financially, but emotionally as well. I made promises to Charlie and his family I intended to keep. However, and unfortunately, business and ethics don't always see eye to eye.

I knew I was in for an uphill battle, so I was feeling more than a little agitated as the morning wore on. When my assistant buzzed me and said that Chandler and his protege were outside, I sighed in resignation and put a smile on my face.

“Send them in, please.”

I stood up, wondering who this project manager was. Chandler entered the office first, blocking most of my view. I caught a flash of familiar auburn hair and felt my heart quicken.

No way. It can't possibly be her.

Chandler stepped out of the way, and sure enough, there was my hook up standing there looking fresh as a daisy. Son of a bitch. I'd been wrong. She wasn't a member of DM—she was a member of our firm all along.

Awkward? Yeah, with a capital A.

“Stanley Timmons,” he said, gesturing to me “Meet Ivy Newman. I've given her the purse strings for the Mastercraft project, so try not to be too much of a dick around her, okay?”

I smiled, and I think I even laughed a little bit. She'd already seen my dick, I remembered thinking.

“Ivy,” I said, thrusting my hand out. “Funny, you don't look like a Newman.”

“Nice to see you again, Stan,” she said, cocking an eyebrow.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“You two know each other?” Chandler asked, his mouth agape.

“We met at the party last night,” I said, my eyes inextricably locked with her gaze.

“Oh, well, that’s convenient. Can you get someone to put together a dossier on the Mastercraft project and get it to her by this afternoon, Stan?”

“Yeah, no problem, I’ve got extensive notes. I’ve done a lot of research on this one, Chandler.”

“Don’t convince me, convince her,” Chandler said with a chuckle. “Well, I need to brief Ivy on some of her responsibilities while I’m gone. If you’ll excuse us?”

“Nice seeing you again,” I said, taking her hand. Her touch sent a cool blue electric thrill through my nervous system.

“Likewise,” she said, her eyes sparkling. I could tell she fondly recalled the previous night just as much as I did.

She headed out the door, and Chandler turned to face me.

“Listen, Stan,” he said with a sigh. “I’m sure you’ve noticed that Ivy is very attractive—”

“Nah, went right over my head.”

“I’m being serious, Stan.” His lips became a tight line. “She’s very young, eager to

please, and you probably think that this fact makes her easy prey for your charms. This is on-the-job training for her, man. She's a star on the rise and I want her at our firm. You should too."

"Jesus Christ, man, all right. Do you think my dick is like the pied piper of financial department interns or fucking what?"

"No, I think that sometimes you like to think with the little head instead of the big one. And I think that if you make the mistake of doing that with Ivy, you're going to cost this firm a valuable resource."

Chandler chuckled, his lips pulling back into a toothy smile.

"What are you grinning at, asshole?"

"Oh, I was just thinking. This rule of not shitting where you eat won't apply if you fall in love with her."

"You're kidding."

"Of course I'm kidding." Chandler rolled his eyes. "I'm speaking to a man whose vanity plates read SYNGL4LYF. I know that you're never going to settle down. You tell us every single day."

He clapped me on the shoulder and left me to stew in my own juices. I was more than a little bit pissed at him, but at the same time, his words planted the seeds for a really clever idea.

One thing I was glad for: Ivy hadn't blown our cover. A lot of folks would have aired our dirty laundry in the hopes of getting preferential treatment, but she seemed determined to keep it on the down-low.

I felt like I could respect that. I thought maybe we'd even be able to go about our business without it being too awkward.

On the other hand, she'd be working closely with me. I was starting to wonder if I could even avoid the phenomenon of a repeat performance with Ivy.

And what really scared me the most was, I was wondering if I even had a problem with seeing her again.

It was enough to make a man drink. Which I did, but it didn't help. At that point she'd already wormed her way into my mind like a thorn, so deep in that it would probably hurt to try and dig it out.

Little did I know it was only the beginning of my problems—and my salvation.

Chapter Four

Ivy

Dinner with my folks took on a whole new dimension when I headed to their place on Staten Island after work. I wanted to tell them about my good news, and the way I was in line for a possible promotion.

I didn't just want to blurt it out, though. There's a certain unwritten rule at my parent's house for dinner, that you keep it cool and light at least until the dessert course has made an appearance.

I took a cab over to the Island and arrived at my parent's place. They'd moved into the efficiency apartment over the family dry cleaning and tailoring business after my oldest sister got married and moved out.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

Now my three older sisters all worked for Mom and Dad. I was the sole holdout, the only one who'd gone out to make it on her own.

A lot of people might assume I was being greedy when I decided not to carry on the family business. After all, I was probably going to only get a one-fourth share of it when our parents passed.

The truth was, I just didn't want to spend my life doing what my parents did. Yes, it was fine for them, but I was always more fond of the accounting aspects than the actual physical labor.

I tipped the cabbie lavishly, a testament to my good mood, and entered the apartment through the ground floor access door. One trip up a steep staircase later, and I found myself enveloped in the smell of Mom's lentil soup. My belly rumbled when I realized she'd made her take on Red Lobster cheddar bake biscuits. Trust me, the ones my Ma made were way, way better than the original.

I rapped on the door, then twisted the knob. The smells and the heat of the kitchen intensified as I stepped through.

"Hello," I called. "It's just me, don't call the cops."

My sister Irene looked up from her phone and waved a happy hello. Her husband Jeff and their son Christian were in the living room, playing video games with motion-active controllers. It looked like the ten-year-old Christian was beating both his father and grandfather.

My other sisters, Iris and Isabelle, hadn't arrived as of yet. I joined my mom in the kitchen only to find that she had pretty much everything ready.

"Mom, I told you to wait for me. At least let me set the table, geez."

Mom looked over at me from the stove and waved off my concerns with an oven mitt hand.

"Don't be silly. You worked all day, you don't need to do a damn thing but sit yer ass down."

"I'm setting the table." I took a stack of plates out of the cabinet. My mother took them right out of my hands. "I'm setting the table, Ma."

"How are you gonna do that when I'm holding the plates?"

That's when it hit me. The plates were way too lightweight. I mean, I was used to the heavy-duty China my mother always broke out for family dinners and holidays. These were okay, but sort of basic, like they'd grabbed the first box at Ikea and walked out of the maze with it.

"Mom, what's with the plates?"

"Whaddaya mean, what's with the plates? I told you, sit down, I'm setting the table."

"No, I mean, where are the regular plates? How come you replaced them with those ugly-ass things?"

Ma heaved a long sigh and took her oven mitts off. She wandered over to the door separating the kitchen from the living area and closed it gently. Normally she keeps it open because there's better ventilation that way. The kitchen quickly became stifling,

and I don't just mean from the heat.

"Ivy," she said with a sigh. "I was hoping to avoid this conversation until after dinner, but it's like this: we sold the family China on the internet."

"You what?" My face twisted into a scowl. "But why? You loved that set, Ma."

"I did, but we needed a new furnace, and they don't come cheap."

"Why didn't you ask me for help?"

"I didn't want to bother you."

I felt betrayed, and more than a little angry.

"So you were going to wait to tell me until after you, what, had to sell the business?"

"Shh." My mom said, putting her finger to her lips. "Don't say that so loud. That's the last resort, something we really don't want to do, but—to be honest, it might come to that."

"Ma..." I settled down into a chair, numb and senseless. Well, I was sitting down, just like she wanted. "I can't believe it."

"We had some rough months there, like most people in the industry, but we've been bouncing back—or we were, until the furnace debacle. The fact is, we maxed out all of our cards taking care of that, on top of selling the China, and a few other things."

"Like what?"

"Like your father's Mickey Mantle baseball card."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“Oh no,” I shook my head. “That meant the world to him. Oh, Mom, I’m so sorry. It’s because I left—”

“Oh, stop. We’ve got plenty of hands to run the shop. Your being here wouldn’t have made one shit lick of difference.”

“Ma, gross,” I said with a disgusted grimace. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Like what? That we’ve got plenty of people to run the shop?”

“No, don’t be a goof, I mean shit lick. What does that even mean? I can’t believe you made me say it out loud.”

“It’s an expression, don’t take it literally.”

I lapsed into silence. Sell the family business? It hurt, a lot, even though I wasn’t really involved with the biz side of things anymore. I just always assumed the shop would always be there, eternal in perpetuity and all that bullshit.

Now, I had to confront the reality that not only could my parents lose their business, but that it might be sooner rather than later.

“I’m assuming Dad knows.”

“Of course. Your sisters all know, too.”

“So I’m literally the last person in the world finding out about this?” I crossed my

arms over my chest and huffed. “Seriously, mom.”

“Come on, Ivy.” Mom sat down beside me and put a hand on my shoulder. “Out of all my daughters, you’re the one who I was the most worried about telling the bad news to.”

“Why? You think because I’m the youngest I can’t handle it?”

“No, you’re the most stubborn of all my daughters. I knew that as soon as you found out, you’d try to move heaven and earth to save the business.”

“What’s so wrong with that?” I asked.

“Dear, do you remember when you were determined to build a rain man? How you spent an hour and a half out in the cold rain trying to make it work, and in the end you just got pneumonia?”

“I was eight, Ma, give me a break.”

“My point is you don’t give up. You’re tenacious, and that’s helped you a lot. It’s one of your great qualities, but it’s also your Ajax heel.”

“Achilles heel, Ma.”

“That’s what I said.” She sighed. “You push yourself too hard for lost causes. That’s all. I’m just saying, pick your battles.”

“It sounds like you’re saying I can’t do a damn thing to stop this.”

“Honey,” Ma said with a long sigh. “I’m not sure that anyone can stop it. Once you get upside down on a loan and a card or two, it’s a downhill slide on a slippery slope.

I just keep thinking that if we retired—but I always wanted our kids to carry on the legacy.”

A stab of guilt hit me hard in my gut. I put my hand on top of her own and squeezed.

“Ma, don’t sell yourself short. There might still be a way. Maybe there’s some kind of government small business assistance program you can take advantage of?”

“See? You’re doing it already.”

“Doing what?”

“Trying to take over.”

“Ma, I’m not trying to take over.” I rolled my eyes to the ceiling. “I just want to make sure that you and dad are doing everything possible to make this work.”

“You think we’re not?” Mom’s eyes grew narrow. “You think just because you got that fancy college edu-macation that you’re smarter than me? I’ve got thirty years on you, missy, and I’ll always be thirty years smarter and wiser—”

She stopped, because I was speaking along with her.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“I don’t really sound like that,” she said, miffed.

The door swung open, bringing with it a welcome blast of fresh air, and Dad walked in.

“Actually, you sort of do.”

Time had bent my father’s back some and scared the hair off the top of his head to run down to his back, but his eyes were still merry, his mouth still pulled into a smile.

“How ya doing, Ivy?” He gave me a big hug, and I sighed into his massive barrel chest.

“I’m good, Dad. Actually, I’ve got some good news.”

I wanted to avoid any more conflict with my mother and father over the business. Fortunately, my ruse worked.

“Oh yeah?” Dad settled into the chair beside me, his big belly smooshed against the table. “I love good news. It’s my favorite kind.”

“You didn’t tell me you had good news.” Mom said, clearly miffed.

“Ma, come on,” I gave her a power shrug. “I mean, seriously, I was a little bit distracted here.”

Dad put his hand on top of my own for a moment to get my attention.

“You were saying about the good news?”

“It’s about my job. Remember how I told you about my finding that million-dollar accounting error?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Dad burst into laughter, his cheeks getting red. “I don’t pretend like I understand it, but I remember it.”

“Well, I got called into my boss’s office today, and he made me a project manager for Mastercraft beer.”

“Mastercraft beer?” Dad perked right up. “I love Mastercraft beer. It might be my third favorite kind.”

“Well, you’d better start telling people it’s your favorite, because we’re going to be taking this brand to the stars.” I sighed. “Or so I hope. To tell you the truth, there’s a huge amount of pressure on me. If I fail in this, then I can kiss any kind of promotion goodbye.”

“On the other hand,” Dad said, taking a sip from his beer, “if you do a kick-ass job of things, they’ll hand you the keys to the city. As it were.”

Soon my sisters and their families joined us, and we all sat down at two tables set next to each other. With over a dozen people sitting at the table, things got pretty noisy.

However, everyone made sure to congratulate me on my possible promotion at the firm. My family is like that. No matter how much was going on at any given time, we always found time to support each other.

I just wished I could return the favor. My family’s business was in jeopardy. Not just

the business, but the dynasty as well.

My bonus for project management, and my salary were generous, but not enough to bail out the business. I couldn't just reach into my bank account and make this problem go away.

I hate feeling helpless, and that's just how it was. Long after dinner ended and I sat in my bed at home, staring at the ceiling, I couldn't stop trying to scheme. I had to find a way to save my family's home and business.

I just didn't know how I was going to do that.

Chapter Five

Stan

Ivy was stuck in my mind, but I had a surefire cure. It involved me, my bros, and a shit ton of alcohol consumption. Unfortunately, fate is a fickle bitch, and she had other ideas about how my evening was to go.

First, I hit up Jonathon. I figured he'd been married with children the longest, he'd be the most likely to want to break free. I popped into his office, finding him on his headset talking to wifey while packing up to leave.

"Just a second, hon, Stan the Man wants something." He tapped the side of his headset and cocked an eyebrow my way. "What is it, Stan? I don't know if you can tell or not, but I'm kind of in the middle of something here."

"Amelia can wait. What can't wait is ladies' night at Gentleman Jack's."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“When you’re married, my friend, ladies’ night doesn’t mean as much as it used to.”
Jonathon patted me on the arm. “But I hope that you have fun, man.”

Prick.

“Have fun falling asleep in your soup, you domesticated fuck.”

He grinned and went back to his call. He didn’t even flip me off or anything. God damn it all.

I tried Mason, but he’d already left. Apparently he’d headed home early to have dinner with his wife’s bohemian friends. Some kind of party—and I hadn’t been invited.

Miffed, I hit up Chandler, but he was too busy trying to wrap up loose ends before his paternity leave began.

“So,” I said to my reflection in the mirror as I prepared to go out alone. “Once again, it’s Stan the Man with his target locked on women. I don’t need the guys. Let them languish at home pretending they’re happy. In reality, love never lasts.”

I snapped my fingers and did a pirouette that would have done The Backstreet Boys proud.

“Glory is forever, and while they sit at home with wifey, Stan the Man’s all-time grand cumulative total is going to keep rising higher, and higher.”

I dressed for success. The type of high-class trim I was after responded well to bling, so I made sure to wear a nice bracelet and gold chain around my neck. I donned my best Rolex, and went with a Gabbana blazer in a deep rust color. It paired well with my ivory dress shirt and charcoal trousers. Definitely peacocking, but with a more subtle class, at least in my opinion.

I splashed on a very light amount of cologne—no chick wants to Mack on you if her eyes are watering—and headed out the door. When I hit the door of the bar, I looked out at all of the sweet prey spread out before me—

And felt disappointment. None of them were Ivy. I stubbornly forged on ahead, but my heart wasn't in it. I danced with gorgeous women, told them I would be right back, and then abandoned them to talk to another.

I collected phone numbers like trophies. I had so many new contacts I'd added descriptions to the names. Like 'blonde, stacked' Stacy, and 'brunette, nice ass' Lila.

And yet, I didn't even feel a glimmer of ambition to call any of them.

I wound up at the bar counter, where I found a young dark-haired woman tending the bar. In between her serving drinks, I started working my charm on her.

"So, you're wanting to go to school to be a what now?" I asked as she leaned low over the counter so I could check out her cleavage.

"A personal assistant to the stars. I mean, I would so love to work for a famous actress or musician. You know, making their appointments, making sure they kept them, that sort of thing"

"That is fascinating," I lied. In truth, I was thinking, damn, why not have the ambition to BE a famous person instead of serving one? It seemed like aiming low to me for

some reason, but then again I'm a habitual overachiever with issues. "Tell me more."

"Well, I once read that Khloe Kardashian's personal assistant pulls down a six-figure salary with full benefits, and two months of paid vacation per year."

"Damn." I pursed my lips into a frown. I'd been ripping on the idea a moment earlier, but those were some damn good carrots for employment.

"Yeah, it's a big deal." She smiled. "Tell you what. I've got a break coming up. How about if you buy me lunch?"

"You've got yourself a deal."

I met her about fifteen minutes later outside the bar. She had covered her tight midriff-baring t-shirt with a stylish coat, and her lips pulled back in a smile.

Her name was Sylvia. Sylvia. At the moment it didn't seem that important.

"Hey, how are you?"

"Starving."

I escorted her to a cafe across the street, and paid for a philly cheesesteak combo which we wound up sharing because it was just huge. I could tell she was into me. I thought I was into her.

Sylvia sucked the sauce off her finger, eyes alight with a suggestive glow. I knew I was in there. She gave me a long, hard look, then spoke.

"I get off at two-thirty. Maybe you could pick me up then?"

I smiled ear to ear. Check and mate.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“That sounds great, Ivy.”

Record scratch.

“Ivy?” confusion quickly turned to anger, her face a grotesque mask of wounded pride and rage. “Ivy? Are you fucking kidding me?”

She got up and pounded me on the shoulder with her fist.

“It’s not even close to my name.”

“C’mon, um, ah—”

“You can’t even remember my name, can you?”

“It’s an S word,” I blurted. “Definitely—Sammy?”

“Screw you.”

She stormed out the door, leaving me feeling more than a little bit foolish. I’d called her by the wrong name, but come on, we’d only just met.

Not like it mattered. I was only flirting with her because she reminded me of Ivy, and the fact that I just kept thinking about her bothered me. The last time the same thing happened to me was in college, my first and last love.

The logical conclusion to that would be that I fell in love with Ivy and the absurdity

of it almost made me laugh.

And even if that was true, love was only temporary. I knew in my heart that sooner or later all love was doomed to failure. My parents' marriage had fallen apart, after all, and they'd had the whole shebang; high school sweethearts, storybook wedding, the works.

What made my friends think they were going to do any better than my folks had?

An idea came to me. I had to find a way to prove to the others in the firm that love was nothing more than temporary madness. Once you were cured, it was over and that's why the divorce rate was so high in our country.

My genius idea was as follows: I needed to find a woman I could pay to be my pretend girlfriend.

Then I would masquerade around with her on my arm, pretending to have fallen in love, and take it all the way to the point where it looks like I'm going to marry her—only to reveal the sham at the last moment.

When they saw that my fake love was indistinguishable from their own 'real' love, Mason, Chandler, and Jon would have to take a good look at their own lives and ask themselves some tough questions.

Then they would see that I had been right all along. Love is nothing more than a temporary mental condition, and the nuclear family unit is an outdated thing. And if that wouldn't convince them, then at least I would have the pleasure of pulling the prank of the century on these assholes.

At least, this is what I was hoping for. It was devious, and most of all, it gave me the feeling I was doing something. Not just sitting around moping about the fact that all of

my friends had been tamed.

I loved my friends and I wanted them to be happy. I also loved the brotherhood that we had before they were domesticated and I wanted that back. And it was quite some time since I played any pranks on them, and good pranks were my specialty.

Now that I had the plan, I needed to find an ideal candidate. Someone willing to play my pretend girlfriend. I would almost certainly have to compensate them for their time. Not only did I have no problem with this, I thought it would even help prove my point all the more.

I thought about Jack, a private eye who did a lot of work for the firm. Then I realized that Jack would want to create an entire character for the performance, and it could get really annoying, really fast. Besides, the thought of spending more than five minutes in the same room with her sent cold shivers down my spine.

I thought about an escort but rejected the idea. I didn't want to get caught, and you never know who at our firm has walked on the wild side.

Then, with great reluctance, I thought of Ivy.

I instinctively discarded the idea at first, but slowly, I began to warm up to it. Our mutual attraction and prior physical encounter weren't problems; they were solutions. There would be just enough real chemistry there for the guys at the firm to accept the bait hook, line, and sinker.

In my mind, it was the perfect plan. The fact that she worked at the firm just made the fake relationship more convenient. And that would also help to keep it a strictly business relationship from start to finish.

I headed home and worked out the more nefarious details of my plot. When I would

announce our engagement, what restaurant I'd book for the engagement party, even what wedding planner I was going to hire to plan the fake wedding.

Money was no object. I saw myself as fighting for the very souls of my friends. I wanted them to see the light, and come back to my way of thinking. That was a noble goal, in my estimation, and therefore was one of the rare times I would permit myself to waste money.

No, not waste money. Sacrifice money in the name of a worthy cause. I saw the domestication of my fellow board members as weakness, pacification, even so much as being neutered.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

I had to put the venom back in the cobras, and I thought that I'd come across the perfect way to pull it off. A perfect prank, a tale for the ages.

I was willing to spend millions of dollars to humble my friends, and I didn't care what happened along the way.

What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Six

Ivy

Normally I felt pretty good after dinner with my family. Normally, however, I don't find out from my mother that the family business is on the verge of collapse.

I wasn't sure what to do. Mom wasn't sharing a lot of details about how much they owed and to whom, but I was pretty good with research. I looked up the typical mortgage, property taxes, and then took into account my father's recent heart surgery.

If my calculations were even close to being accurate, my family was in big trouble and I didn't have the financial means to help. My contributions would be a drop in the bucket.

I spent most of the night after dinner lying awake in my bed. I watched the moon trace shadows on the wall until it vanished behind the concrete mountains of skyscrapers. I'm not sure when I finally fell asleep, having turned my clock face away from me to decrease my anxiety over insomnia. I am sure that when I awakened

in the cold light of dawn, my eyes felt puffy and tired, and I wanted nothing more than to just stay in bed all day.

I couldn't do that, however. My tryout, the projects I was to manage—including the biggest one, Mastercraft Beer—wouldn't wait because of some insomnia.

Fortunately, I had some coffee pods with double the caffeine content to get my motor going. By the time I got on the subway and raced away toward work, I was feeling positively human.

Not great, but human. I was no closer to figuring out how to help my family keep their business, but at least I wouldn't pass out on the subway platform and fall into the path of a train.

When I got in the elevator at work, I accidentally hit the wrong floor. My new, temporary office was right next door to Chandler's. That meant I was working on the same floor as the big wigs, including my one-night stand, Stan.

So far, things had gone well with Stan. He was more than willing to keep our tryst a secret, and that scored him a lot of points in my regard. A lot of people would have used it as leverage. Stan didn't seem like that kind of person, and it made me feel a lot better about working with him—not to mention sleeping with him.

I sat down at my new, if temporary, desk and opened my laptop. Time to get to work. Only I soon found that my itinerary was far more than crunching numbers. I had meetings to schedule, among them a cursory visit from the Securities and Exchange Commission. There were new staff to transfer into our management structure, and I was shocked at how much Chandler had left for me to do.

I worked for three and a half hours, my mind lost in the numbers. It felt good to leave behind the problems of my real life for the problems of work. After all, the problems

of work could be solved.

The bitter irony of it all was I could have easily moved funds around and had some stick to my fingers, as it were. Maybe even enough to pay my family's way out of their predicament.

Unfortunately, I wasn't a thief.

Later, I had a teleconference with about seven people on the board of directors for Mastercraft Beer. Stan was on the call, too, but he didn't say much. In fact, he seemed oddly subdued.

The Mastercraft board were keenly interested in maintaining their stellar reputation. I was quick to point out that awards didn't always translate into sales.

"Mastercraft means something," Chairman of the Board Nils Galley said. "It's not just a name on the label. When I agreed to sell a controlling interest to your firm, I believed it was to expand our existing formula, not compromise it."

"I'm not saying it's bad to win awards," I said quickly. "I don't propose messing with your formula at all. I'm just proposing that we look for ways to get the beer on more shelves and going home in more trunks."

"That's what we all want," Stan added. "Right gentlemen? So, let's talk turkey. How do we get our product on more shelves?"

The meeting went well, after some initial friction. Stan backed me up every step of the way. I didn't want to be too miserly with the purse strings, and nothing that anyone requested seemed out of line.

Even when Stan extolled on the virtues of giant inflatable bears.

“You’ve never heard of a beer called ‘Hamm’s’, but I remember them because they had a giant inflatable bear at the fourth of July parade. I’m just saying, a giant inflatable mascot couldn’t hurt.”

“Mastercraft doesn’t have a mascot,” Nils sniffed. “It has never needed one.”

“Nils has a point,” I interjected. “I mean, back when you were a kid, a cartoon bear was fine as a mascot for a major beer brand. These days, they’ll try to accuse us of getting underage people to drink with our cartoon mascot.”

“Okay, I concede the point.” Stan didn’t sound bitter at all, another big plus in his win column. “What about a more mature mascot? You know, like that whole ‘most interesting man in the world’ bit?”

“It’s already been done. I would say trying to get a celebrity endorsement might be our best bet, but that can get really expensive.” I sighed. “I’m not sure this is a productive area of discussion, gentlemen.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“Okay, then let me float one final idea before we table it completely,” Stan said. “What if we used an in-house celebrity?”

“Who did you have in mind?”

“Rick Dirkson. He starred in the Riverwind movies, and he’s already done promotional work for the collectible card game.”

I considered it for a long moment.

“We might be skirting awfully close to the same argument. Kids play the collectible card game, and the same guy that pushes rare foil embossed cards is now going to push an adult beverage?”

“What do you think we should do, then?”

Stan didn’t sound angry or upset. I gave it a few moments of thought, and then spoke.

“What about a focus group? We can come up with a few pitches and see how it plays with the public.”

“Good idea,” Stan said. “What do you think, Nils?”

“I think it’s a great idea.”

“All right. Focus group for possible mascot/spokesman pitches is a done deal.” I checked the time. “If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I’m going to be late for a Zoom

call.”

“Good meeting,” Nils said.

One by one the Mastercraft board signed off the call, until only Stan and I remained.

“You should be proud,” he said. “I’ve heard Nils say the words ‘good meeting’ exactly one time since we started working together. That man is impossible to please.”

“Beginner’s luck, I’m sure,” I replied, though on the inside I was celebrating. It pleased me that Stan was pointing out how well I was performing. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, though. I didn’t like the idea of him having that much power over me.

“You’re much too modest.” He cleared his throat. “Listen, I’ve got something I need to talk to you about. A proposal if you will.”

“Okay,” I said. “Go ahead and shoot it past me.”

“I think it might be better if we met outside of work hours. Would you be willing to join me for dinner tonight?”

“Dinner?” I frowned. “I’m not sure if I should accept, given our past history and current working conditions.”

“Would it help if I told you that I’m not trying to ask you out on a date?”

I digested that for a moment. The fact was, it helped and it didn’t. I found a part of myself disappointed that he didn’t want to date me.

“I guess so.”

“Good. Shall we meet at the Saigon Cafe at half-past seven?”

“I think I can manage that, yes.”

“Excellent. I’ll see you then.”

He left the call, and I stood there wondering exactly what he’d been getting at. At first, his intentions seemed obvious. What else could he want to talk about outside of work other than us? The past, the present, and the possible future?

But then he said that he was not looking to ask me out. That put my head into a tailspin. If he didn’t want to sleep with me again, what could his motivations be?

I began to construct all kinds of illicit ideas. Maybe he wanted me to help him embezzle money from the other partners. Or perhaps he was working with some kind of official investigation and needed my help.

None of the speculation made me any less anxious. In fact, my fertile imagination might have made the wait insufferable.

I was almost glad when my Zoom meeting went long and I had no time to change before meeting Stan at the restaurant. It removed the need to worry about how I should dress for the occasion.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

I pulled up outside the restaurant in a cab, trepidation mounting in my chest. I began to feel like I'd made a mistake, like I should have insisted he make his proposal at work. The last thing I wanted to do was put myself in a vulnerable position with the firm when I was on the cusp of really making my mark.

But I had to find out what Stan wanted. I was dying of curiosity. Like as not, I was sort of into him, and I got the feeling he was sort of into me, too.

Or maybe I was a lot more than sort of into him, and that was the real reason for my trepidation. Would it be worth my career just to be close to a one-night stand I'd started to get the feels for?

"Hey, lady," the cabbie said. "I don't have all night. Are you getting out or what?"

He had a point. I was going to have to make a decision. Have the cab turn around and leave—

Or stay, and find out just what kind of proposal Stan intended to make.

Chapter Seven

Stan

I sat at the table of the fine dining restaurant, sipping water from a five-hundred-dollar crystal glass and wondering if she was going to show up or not.

I may have been too enigmatic. Who knew what she was thinking about me at that

point? Did she think I was out for something lascivious? Or larcenous, for that matter?

I began to worry that I'd gone too far. I took my phone out and sent a text, asking if she was still coming.

For a long moment, nothing happened. I started to put away my phone in disgust, but then the three undulating dots appeared on the screen.

They hung there for a long time. Either she was typing a long message, or she was editing a message heavily, or she couldn't figure out what to send. I waited with mounting impatience until suddenly she replied in the affirmative.

I turned my gaze toward the front entrance, and saw Ivy come in. Her eyes seemed haunted, her hair attempting to escape the tight bun at the back of her head. She smiled warmly at the hostess and soon the two of them made their way over to my table.

I stood up at Ivy's approach. I couldn't help but remember that one fiery night when she was mine, all mine. I fought that instinct down. Right now, I needed to convince her to play along with my plan.

"Ivy," I said, going in for a side hug. She accepted it readily enough, though she carefully held her face away from my own. "So glad you could make it. Sit down. Are you hungry?"

"Is the pope catholic?" She stared at the menu. "What the fuck is this? Mongolian?"

"It's French. I can ask for a translated menu—"

"Nah, just—whatever this is, it looks good."

“What? Oh, the Coq Du Vin. If you like chicken.”

“Everybody loves chicken. Have you ever noticed how the chicken is a sacred animal in zero religions? Nobody wants to give up eating chicken.”

I laughed, and sat back in my chair.

“I guess I never thought of it that way before.”

I ordered a fish stew I’d grown fond of, served with crusty toasted bread. While we waited for the food to arrive, I attempted to make small talk. Emphasis on attempted.

“Okay,” she said, rolling her eyes as I made a comment about the ambiance. “Let’s stop pussy-footing around here, all right? You asked me here for a specific reason. You said it had nothing to do with what went down the first time we met.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she rapped her painted nails on the table in a rapid tempo.

“So what is it you want with me, exactly? Because if you’re expecting me to help you embezzle money, you can forget it.”

“What?” I shook my head. “No. That’s not—I would never—no, I’m not trying to enlist you in anything illegal.”

“That’s good to know.” Ivy related, though her dark brown eyes continued to smolder with suspicion. “Then what are you trying to enlist me into?”

“I need your help to prove a point to my fellow board members in the firm. A point I think they really need to learn posthaste.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“And what point is that?” she cocked an eyebrow and waited

“That love is just a sham, a fool’s game, and flies in the face of human nature.” I spoke in a rush, a bit surprised at my own vitriol. She seemed taken aback, but then she started nodding.

“Yeah, I get it. It’s human nature to want to spread your genes far and wide, and have as many kids with as many partners as possible.”

“Exactly,” I said, thumping my fist on the table. “I mean, the whole thing is an exercise in futility.”

“You’re preaching to the choir,” she said, sighing in relief. “I mean, do animals in the wild get married?”

“Not that I know of.” I poured us each a few fingers of champagne. “So, I’m hoping to prove to the fellows that there is no such thing as love, because fake love looks just like their own ‘real’ love they have in their marriages.”

“Fake love?” I saw the wheels turning behind her eyes. I knew that she was smart, like really smart, but I had no idea she could put things together so quickly. “Wait, you want me to pretend to be in love with you? Is that it?”

“Close. I want us both to pretend to be in love with each other.” I leaned forward in my seat, eager to discuss the details of my plan. “I’ve done a ton of research, so I know what beats to hit and when in the relationship. It’s going to look totally authentic to them—but only if I work with the right woman.”

“And you think I’m the right woman?”

“I think you’re perfect,” I blurted.

For a long moment neither of us spoke. My statement just kind of hung there, and it was kind of up in the air as to whether we were going to deal with it at face value or not. I turned coward first, however.

“I mean, you’re perfect for this gig. We’ve already had sex, so people will believe that we’re still banging.”

She snorted champagne out her nose, then started laughing as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Oh god, did you have to wait until I was drinking to say that?” She sputtered a bit, and shook her long dark hair. “I guess it helps maintain the illusion, though, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed. So are you on board?”

“I don’t know,” she said, pursing her lips tightly. “I’m not the kind of person who gets off on lying. In fact, my whole family kind of frowns on dishonesty, so—”

“You wouldn’t go unrewarded.” I steepled my hands together in front of me and stared over them at her. “I realize this is going to be a huge inconvenience, and disrupt the normal flow of your love life for the interim. I would never dream of impugning on your time without just and fair compensation.”

Our food arrived, but the entree wasn’t the only thing she was chewing over. I glanced at her from time to time. Her eyes remained distant. I knew that she waged an internal struggle, and I wanted to give her space. The last thing I wanted was for her

to do something that made her uncomfortable. I already had her hooked. The only thing left was to carefully reel her in.

“I—I don’t know.”

“Do you need some time to think about it some more?”

Ivy pursed her lips, and then arched her brows.

“I think I need to know some more details. I mean, would you be expecting...”

Her voice trailed off. I waited, but she didn’t elaborate.

“Would I be expecting what?”

“You know.” She looked all around the restaurant, at the ice sculpture, at the glass chandelier, anywhere but at me.

“Ivy,” I spread my hands out wide. “I don’t know, because you won’t tell me. What are you trying to get at?”

“You’re not going to expect me to sleep with you as part of this deal, are you?”

“No, of course not,” I said quickly. “I’m not trying to treat you like a prostitute.”

“I’m being paid to spend time with you, and pretend to like you. How is that much different?”

“Um... you’re being paid for a performance. How about that? Like an actor.”

“Actors don’t lie.”

I sipped my champagne and fixed her with a frank stare.

“Are you sure about that? Is Chris Hemsworth really a god of thunder? No, but we pay him a lot of money to pretend to be one. I’m paying you a lot of money to pretend to be my girlfriend. Is it really that much different?”

“I guess not. As long as we’re clear sex is not included in the package, I think I might be willing to discuss terms with you.”

“That’s great—”

“But I want two hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars. And I’m going to need it in advance.”

I was taken aback. Wanting it in advance was negotiable, if not something I had expected to hear come out of her mouth. Mostly, I was thinking that it was a rather oddly specific number to request.

Most people go for amounts by the tens. You know, ten thousand. A hundred grand. Half a million. I’ve never heard someone request such a precise number before. I got the impression she had something in mind for the money, and she needed it fast.

“Wait a moment. I don’t mind paying you in advance, at least not in theory, but how do I know if this is going to work out?”

She set her glass down and stared at me hard.

“What?” I prompted when she didn’t say anything.

“Fine. You want a demonstration?” She gestured to the outside terrace area, the last refuge for the persecuted smoker and a place to get some fresh air. “Let’s step outside for a moment.”

“All right.”

I stood up and we went toward the terrace, and she entwined her arm with mine. I eyed her, and she beamed a smile my way.

Once we got outside, she kept herself pressed against my side like glue. With everything I said she burst into laughter like it was so funny. At one point she swept her fingers through my hair and pursed her lips.

“What?”

“What kind of conditioner do you use?”

“Why do you want to know that?”

“You have nice hair, I just think you should take care of it. What if I buy you some conditioner?”

“Um, okay,” I said.

“Oh, you two are just adorable,” said an older woman sitting nearby, a cigarette with a long ash balanced in her venerable fingers. “Sometimes you can just tell when it’s going to work out. Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” she said, beaming a smile at the old woman. “I guess when you know, you know, right?”

She leaned into me and smiled. “Hey, babe, you want to go back in and see what they have for dessert?”

“Sure.”

We went back into the restaurant, and she gave me a smirk.

“Okay, that was impressive.”

I didn’t want to admit how good it felt to have her pressed against me or doting on every word I said. It felt damn good, as a matter of fact. Too good.

“Thank you.” She smiled. “You know, it’s too bad we don’t believe in love.”

“Why is that?”

“C’mon, man. The chemistry we got? Fugetaboutit.” She dazzled me with another smile. “I mean, at least in the short term we know we work. Of course nobody works in the long term, right?”

“Yeah,” I said as I watched her go back to our table. “Right.”

Chapter Eight

Ivy

A chalk muralist sprawled on the sidewalk a few steps from the bench Stan and I perched upon. I studied her picture, which appeared to include the statue of liberty but with Joker makeup. I didn't really see what she drew, though, because my mind raced with what I was entering into.

I had begged the universe for some way to help me save my parents' business. Well, there it sat, right next to me, and I was worried that I hadn't made the right decision.

Stan sat beside me, one leg flung up over the other. I could see the designer logo on the bottom of his shoe, worn slightly smooth. A paper cup of coffee rested in his hand, steam curling up into the air only to be dispersed by his exhalations. His eyes burned into me as I tried to gather my thoughts.

I mean, how do you hammer out the details of a fake relationship?

“If you're waiting for me to start, I should tell you I've got nothing.” I sipped my own coffee, savoring the caramel flavor on my tongue.

“I see.” Stan frowned. “I'm not sure what to say, either.”

“This whole thing was your idea.” I gave him a look. “C'mon, throw me a bone

here.”

“Well, I guess we should start by sketching out a basic trajectory for how this relationship is going to play out.”

“This fake relationship.”

“Right,” he said, his face a grimace of embarrassment. “This fake relationship.”

I had been fighting with something for a while. I eventually gave voice to my concerns.

“Um,” I said. “I’m just going to come out and say it. Am I supposed to kiss you?”

That question took him aback. I hadn’t known Stan long, but rumor had it he was seldom at a loss for words.

“Well,” he said, his eyes suddenly gleaming with a hard decision. “Of course you’re supposed to kiss me. I mean, you ARE my girlfriend, right?”

I hated myself for the little thrill that ran through me at his declaration. I had to keep reminding myself it wasn’t real. If not, I could easily get lost in this thing.

“Okay, granted, it would be weird if we didn’t kiss.” I cocked an eyebrow at him. “But I normally don’t kiss a guy until at least the second date, sometimes not until the sixth. Or at all.”

“Wait, you have a time quota on kissing?” He leaned forward, intent upon my next words.

“Sure, I mean, I guess I never really thought about it much until now.” I frowned

thoughtfully as I mulled it over. “But yeah, kissing on the first date is a definite never.”

“Um, you kissed me on our first date.”

My heart skipped a beat, but I think I kept it off of my face.

“That doesn’t count.”

“Doesn’t count?” he blurted, an exasperated but amused laugh pushing out of his chest.

“Yeah, that wasn’t a date. I don’t kiss guys I want to like that fast.”

“What?” Stan drew back. “You didn’t want to like me?”

“Well, no, if I wanted to like you, I wouldn’t have fucked you that fast. I just thought we obviously needed each other at that moment and I wasn’t thinking about the future.”

“Good to know,” he said, looking at me warily. “So, does this count as our first date? What’s the chronology here?”

“Ah, I’m not sure what you mean.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“Everyone always asks how long you’ve been dating at some point,” he said.

“Okay, I’ll grant you that. I guess we should call this our first date.”

“So I’m not getting a kiss when it’s over?”

I laughed, though my cheeks flushed red. It felt so strange to be having such a discussion.

“Well, not on the lips.”

“So a peck on the cheek, maybe? That first date centric enough?”

I gave him a look, drumming my fingers on the table.

“I’m starting to regret ever having opened my mouth,” I growled.

“So when’s the first kiss on the mouth? Then when does the tongue come into play?”

“Is this really necessary?” I said, growing increasingly exasperated. He had a way of getting under my skin. “I mean, how often do you tongue kiss in front of other people?”

“Have you SEEN my partners? I got in the elevator with Mason and Megan the other day. Not only did they tongue kiss, but he grabbed her ass, and she lifted her leg and curled it around his thigh. It was fucking intense.”

I felt suddenly hot. I needed a break to compose myself. The coffee beckoned. I sipped half of it down, gasping at the end.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to play that by ear. If—and I do mean if—maintaining the illusion of our relationship requires the two of us to make out in an elevator, then I’m more than willing.”

“More than willing?”

I cringed on the inside.

“It’s just a turn of phrase, don’t make this... weird.” I laughed and took another sip of water. “I mean, it’s already plenty weird, right? We’re sitting here and discussing the physical parameters of our relationship—our fake relationship—and I’m worried about you making it weird.”

“It’s uncharted territory for both of us.” He raised his glass. “But I think we can make this work.”

“I think so too,” I said, because I believed it.

“So, kissing is in,” Stan said, holding up a hand to forestall my protest. “Eventually. What about hand-holding? Hugging? Public displays of affection? Are they on the table, too?”

“Well, sure,” I said with a shrug. “I mean, that’s the kind of things that couples do, right?”

“So that means you’ll have to, say, sit on my lap if we’re hanging out with my fellow partners?”

My cheeks burned and I couldn't quite look him in the eyes.

"Sitting in your lap?" I laughed anxiously. "Is that your thing?"

"You've never seen girls sit in their guy's lap before?"

"I guess I have, I've just never done it. Or felt the inclination."

"Interesting."

"I mean," I swallowed hard to clear the lump out of my throat. "I don't think I would sit in your lap right away."

"Why not?"

"It's pretty much a broadcast signal that we're fucking." I tripped over my own tongue to correct that little Freudian slip. "That is, a signal that our fake relationship had, um, moved into the bedroom."

"Okay, so at one point would we be having pretend sex for our fake relationship?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

I noticed the chalk muralist looking at us like we were crazy. She donned a pair of headphones and went back to her work. I wished I could escape the awkward conversation with a pair of headphones.

“I’d say a minimum of six weeks.”

“Six weeks! You make the guys you’re dating wait six weeks?”

“Sometimes I make them wait up to three months—”

“But you and I—”

“We weren’t dating then, not even fake dating, so don’t say it.” I sighed. “I’ve never actively quantified this stuff before, all right? It’s uncharted territory, like you said.”

“So I guess we’ll put lap sitting on hold until you’ve decided that our fake relationship involves sex.” He nodded as if the matter was decided. “Works for me.”

He took his phone out and gave me a look.

“I think we should take some photos to post to social media. You know, to sell this properly.”

I gave it some thought, and then nodded.

“Okay, that makes logical sense. Just don’t lay it on too thick.”

I got up and slid into the booth beside him.

“What are you doing?”

“You wanted to take pictures, right?”

I snuggled up against him and put my face near his, close enough I could feel body heat emanating from his skin. I smiled like I was having a great time but was trying to keep my emotions cautiously restrained. Typical first date behavior in my opinion.

Stan, though, tried to smile just huge, and it looked forced.

“Dial back the grin,” I said. “You look like an eight-year-old about to go to the amusement park.”

He laughed, and in that moment a genuine smile lit up his face. I snapped the photo, and then held it out to him.

“See? Much better with a natural smile. Now let’s take a few more.”

I held the phone out and leaned into him a little bit more.

“Okay, now look at me like you’re really into me—no, too much. That’s slavish devotion. Nobody wants to see that on a first date, it’s a red flag you’re with a weird stalker type guy.”

He laughed, and then a profound sort of calm descended over him. Stan looked at me—and I meanlookedat me. In that moment, I was utterly confident he was totally and completely thinking of me and only me.

It was so sweet, so sudden, and so genuine, I almost dropped the phone. I took a snap

of the photo and smiled.

“Perfect.”

I showed it to him, and he gasped.

“Damn. You’re good. Are you, like, a photographer?”

“Oh please, I’m anything but. We sure look cute together. I’d buy that we’re a legit couple.”

Stan went silent, and for a moment we were both keenly aware of how close we really were. As close as we had been the first night we met. His hand was on my shoulder still from the last photo we’d snapped. His fingers slid down my bicep in a caress as he leaned his face in a few inches closer.

“Okay,” I said, swiftly disengaging myself and getting up from the booth. “If this was a real relationship, a touch like that might be appropriate.”

“Touches like that are part of any relationship.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

I grimaced, unsure of how to make my point.

“Yeah, but...”

I had no idea how to put it. Not without accusing him of wanting to touch me that way for more than just performative purposes.

“Yeah, but what?”

“Never mind.” I sat down, but I did so on the opposite side of the booth. What happened to my resolve, not to catch the feels? Why had I been so eager to just blow past my own boundary on the very first day I’d set it?

“Okay, so adoring looks in public, I think that goes without saying.” He sipped his coffee and nodded. “I mean, that would precede a kiss, for sure, right?”

“I don’t even know anymore,” I groaned. “I think we’ve got this basically mapped out now, and I’m tired and just want to go home.”

“I’ll give you a ride.”

He did more than just give me a ride. He gave me a ride in a limo, and then walked me up to my very door.

“So, a productive first date,” he said with a laugh.

“Yes, productive.” I made a fist pump gesture and he chuckled. We lapsed into

silence and just kind of stared at each other for a long moment.

“Well, good night,” he said, looking as if he half wanted to come in for a hug. I remembered our discussion, about how maybe a peck on the cheek was appropriate for a first date. Was that what he expected?

Eventually, we wound up shaking hands, laughing, and backing away.

“Good night, Stan,” I said.

“Good night, Ivy.”

I smiled, closed the door, and turned around to rest my back against it. Slowly, my watery knees gave out and I sank to the floor.

“What have I gotten myself into?” I muttered to my empty apartment.

Chapter Nine

Stan

When I left Ivy’s place, a confusing jumble of feelings knotted up inside of me. My plan was off to a great start. I’d secured my fake girlfriend, and we’d had our first fake date.

Which ended with a very awkward handshake. It occurred to me that maybe we couldn’t sell ourselves to the other partners. That made me worried. What if I was wrong about love, and it was a real, lasting thing? What if they saw right through my ruse for that reason?

That would have been enough turmoil on its own. In my case, though, getting found

out on my scheme right off the bat was just the tip of the iceberg.

What really ate at me was how damn disappointed I felt when she'd gotten out of the booth when I copped a little feel on her arm. Not like I set out to do it. It just kind of happened. It felt natural, in point of fact.

Eventually, I calmed myself down enough to get some sleep. I don't remember what I dreamed but I'm pretty sure it was all rated R and involved my fake girlfriend.

Rated R? More like rated X.

At work the next day, I had a hell of a time concentrating on work. All I could think about was how she was just a few doors down the hall from me. So far, we hadn't any excuses to see each other. I figured that would never do.

If I was dating someone, I'd sure pop in on them just to say hello. I mean, wouldn't I? It was something my mother had done for my father a lot in the early days of their marriage. Just pop into his office to say hello.

I picked up my phone and sent her a text.

I should stop by your office.

A few seconds of watching the dots dance and then—

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

why

It took her that long to type one word?

It's what couples do. Drop in on each other unannounced.

um ok but we only had one date in canon

Canon? I cackled. It was just too ridiculous.

All right. So what if we make our second date Chandler and June's baby shower tomorrow night?

Again the three dots. Again they moved for an awful long time before—

ok what should i wear

Something formal. Don't worry about a gift, I'll get one and say it's from both of us.

i dont have a lot of formal clothes in my closet

Go find yourself something nice and send me the bill.

boyfriends dont buy their girlfriends dresses after the first date

It hit me like a slap in the face. I suddenly remembered it was all pretend. Not real.

Maybe this one does. I am a multibillionaire.

fine

So, does this mean I'm your boyfriend now? In canon, I mean?

No dots. Just nothing, for a long time. I got disgusted and set the phone down. Then, a moment later.

ill see you tomorrow night

Nice way to skirt the issue. I was feeling frustrated, most of all with myself. Why should I care if my pretend girlfriend wasn't willing to call herself my pretend girlfriend yet? I guess we were just pretend-seeing each other? Pretend-going steady?

I had to remind myself not to get carried away. My college roommate was into that dungeons and dragons stuff, and he once got mad because someone killed his elf person character on graph paper. He carried the grudge into the real world.

That was a mistake I hoped to avoid. The greatest thing about my fake relationship was I could reap some of the benefits of having a real one without the pesky commitment or inevitable heartache.

I stopped fretting over the way she got up from the booth. After all, she'd done us both a favor. Good job, Ivy. Way to look out for us and the agreement.

It would be better for everyone if I just remembered it was all pretend.

In spite of myself, I anticipated the date so much the next day seemed to drag by. I checked out of work early and got a fresh haircut and style and a manicure before donning one of my best, most versatile suits. Good for a board room meeting or a

late-night gala.

I splashed on some cologne, and then made one last stop before going to pick up my pretend girlfriend.

Soon I stood at her door, pressing the doorbell with my free hand. I clutched a bouquet of lavender, red, and yellow flowers in the other. My heart thudded in my chest, which was annoying since it was a fake date.

The door opened, and she took my breath away. She'd found herself a red minidress with long, translucent sleeves and a sweetheart scooped neckline that showed just the right amount of cleavage. The skirt flared out in a peplum style below her waist and was adorned with ruffles with subtle butterfly embroidery.

As fantastic as she looked in that dress, once I made eye contact, I couldn't tear my gaze away. Her already incredibly compelling eyes were enhanced—rather unfairly, I'd say—by smoky eye shadow and a thin but ineffably black liner. Ruby red lips stretched in a slight, almost shy smile. She'd done her dark, wavy hair up into a double French braid, emphasizing the curves of her prominent cheekbones.

“You look fantastic,” I said breathlessly.

“Thanks,” she said. I think she blushed, but seeing as she already wore blush it was hard to tell. “Are those for me?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“What?” I suddenly realized I was still holding the bouquet. “Oh yes, they’re for you.”

I handed them over, and she smiled, taking a moment to smell them.

“Peonies. My favorite.”

“I remember.” I remembered because I took notes when we were still hashing out details. Her favorite color was hunter green, but she didn’t like to wear it because she felt it wasn’t her shade. She’d rather stay in and stream a movie than go to the opera. She had three older sisters who beat the crud out of her until she learned how to fight back and protect herself.

“Um, come on in, I guess.” She stepped back. “Second date seems like as good a time as any for you to see the dirty dishes in my sink.”

“Is that a metaphor?” I asked with a smile.

“No, it’s quite literal.” She gestured at her sink, and we both laughed. “I guess it could be a metaphor, though. I mean, what is dating but showing your uglier sides by degrees to insure the other person to them? Like building a callus.”

“You’re equating dating with building a callus?”

She shrugged. “Maybe it’s not the best simile, but am I wrong?”

“I can’t say if you are, or not. I’ve never really dated anyone before.”

“Oh bullshit, you’re rich, young, and good-looking. You’ve got women eating out of your hand and you know it.”

“I didn’t say I couldn’t find a nice young lady to spend the night with. I said that I’ve never really dated.”

“Why not?”

I thought of my parents, and how badly their marriage had ended. Suddenly I didn't want to talk about it any longer.

“It’s not important right now. Are you ready to go?”

“Um, sure, let me grab my purse.”

I could tell by the expression on her face that she knew good and well I was dodging her question, but she let me get away with it. We took the limo downtown, to the five-star hotel where Chandler and June were having their coed baby shower.

“He rented the entire top floor.” I chuckled. “And Mr. Treasurer says I like to waste money.”

I collected our silver wrapped gift—some electronic learning toy thing that hung over the crib—and we walked toward the hotel lobby entrance. I took her hand along the way, and she seemed kind of shocked.

“Hand-holding is okay on the second date, isn’t it?”

“Yes, the second fake date,” she said.

“Ixnay on the akefay,” I said, tucking the present under my arm so I could bring my

index finger to my lips. “Okay? At least while we’re in public.”

“Okay.” She shook like a leaf in the wind as we got in the elevator. When the doors closed I looked at her with concern.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m just freaking out a little bit, okay? And you throwing Latin at me doesn’t help.” She took a deep breath to steady herself. I felt a stab of guilt. My plan was causing her a lot of stress, it was clear. “I’ve never pretended to be someone’s girlfriend before.”

“Just relax, all right? It’s only the second date, you don’t have to pretend to be head over heels for me yet.”

“Right.” She closed her eyes and put her hands to the sides of her head. I wasn’t sure what she was up to, but she seemed to be deep in concentration.

The doors opened, and she suddenly opened her eyes as well. She slipped an arm around my waist and gave me a warm smile with just a hint of adoration.

“Hold still.” She reached up and carefully fixed my hair. Then she brushed microscopic lint off my shoulder and smiled. “You look very handsome tonight.”

“Look who’s talking. People’s jaws are going to drop to the floor.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

The two of us moved into the convention hall, with its elegantly recessed lighting fixtures and ornately designed carpets. The place was packed. I took a moment to soak it all in, while she remained pressed to my side.

“Come on,” she said. “Don’t just stand there. You’re paying good money to have a fake girlfriend on your arm. Don’t you want to mingle?”

“Right.” I spotted Jon and Amelia standing over by the punch bowl, talking to some of the other guests. I made my way over to them.

“Man, they’ll let anyone in here,” I said by way of greeting.

“Stan the Man,” Jonathon said, turning toward me. When he saw I had a woman on my arm, he wasn’t surprised. I mean, it’s not the first time I’ve shown up with a strange woman on my arm. “Glad you could make it.”

“You’re still putting up with this clown?” I asked his wife.

“Yes, he hasn’t managed to get rid of me yet.” She put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. Her eyes focused on Ivy. “Who’s your friend?”

“Oh, this is my date, Ivy,” I said.

“So nice to meet you,” Ivy said. “Jonathon, I believe we’ve run into each other at the office.”

“We have, but I confess I didn’t recognize you at first.” Jonathon looked confused.

You see, Ivy was hanging on me like we were real, real familiar with each other. She laughed at all the right times, gave me flirtatious looks, and kept taking every opportunity to touch me she could.

It reminded me of the way my parents had been before things got bad. Always lovey-dovey, hanging on each other. That bothered me more than a little.

But I had to admit, it felt good to have her being so casually affectionate. Damn good.

It felt so good, in fact, that somewhere in the back of my brain a thought started bouncing around like a bullet fired at lightspeed. What if—crazy as it sounded—Ivy was more than just a pretend girlfriend? What would that be like?

I found myself thinking about it just a little bit too long, and a little bit too hard.

Chapter Ten

Ivy

The baby shower felt surreal, a mythical fairyland where I could pretend to be something I wasn't. Two somethings, really. Affectionate, and Stan's girlfriend.

Some of the men I dated before I started my fake relationship complained that I was somewhat cold or distant. I do recall walking ahead of them in public and fending off their PDAs. I figured maybe I was a person who was only affectionate on rare, intimate times.

Yet, there I was, clinging to Stan like he was a life preserver and I was in a stormy sea. And I made it look good, too. There's no way he could have said I didn't earn my money on that night.

Yet I felt like I wore a suit of inverted spikes. Every hug, every cheek pinch, every playful bounce of a lock of hair tortured me on the inside. A little voice kept yelling at me Liar. Liar. Liar.

Halfway through the night, I found a way to shut that voice up. I started to enjoy myself. Or maybe, I just finally admitted to enjoying myself. It felt good to have people think I was Stan's girlfriend. It felt good to pretend like I was. I liked hanging off him. I liked it when he snaked his arm around my waist and pulled me into him.

The voice stopped calling me a liar. Instead, it started warning me I was going to get hurt, and bad, when this whole fake relationship thing ended. I tried to shut it up by insisting that Stan was an overgrown frat boy, a man child who was great between the sheets but not my type in the streets.

It didn't work. Mostly because Stan wasn't acting like the party animal I'd heard so many stories about before I even met him. He played his part too, I supposed. I had to keep reminding myself that the things he said, the adoring looks, and his light touches were nothing but a ruse. It was important that I not get carried away.

That was what I told myself about halfway through the night. By the end, I'd stopped reminding myself it was fake and just sort of leaned into the performance by pretending it wasn't a performance at all.

It really made my head swim that I was an actor pretending to be Stan's girlfriend who pretended to be Stan's girlfriend in her own head to make the performance better. Or maybe to comfort myself. Or both.

At one point, Stan asked me to dance, and of course I said yes. I was his 'girlfriend,' after all, and what girlfriend doesn't want to dance with her boyfriend?

The slow dance came with lower lighting, which lent an air of intimacy. It got real

uncomfortable, staring into Stan's intense gaze. There was a moment I thought he was going to blurt out he loved me for real. There was a moment when I really wanted him to.

I had to ground myself again, so I shook it off and verbally reminded both of us that this wasn't a real thing.

"Do you think they're buying it?" I asked with a smile for performance's sake.

"What?" He blinked several times and didn't seem to comprehend what I'd asked.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

“Do you think they’re buying it?” I repeated with emphasis, my smile fading. “Us. As a couple.”

“Oh.” Realization—and disappointment?—sprang into his eyes. “Yes, I think you’ve done an excellent job. Your act would convince anybody.”

Something about his tone suggested that he’d been reeled in by my performance as well. I certainly had forgotten it was fake somewhere along the line. But had I done a good thing, or a bad thing by reminding us both of the terms of our unusual contract?

“I need a drink,” he said, leading me off the dance floor by the hand. He handed me a glass of champagne from the table where they awaited guests’ pleasure.

“Put your arm around me,” I said under my breath while taking a sip. “Here comes Chandler.”

We had agreed Chandler would be the hardest of all the partners to convince. He knew the two of us the best, after all, and might even be looking for some kind of scheming from Stan.

Stan slipped his arm around me, his hand resting at the small of my back. His little fingertip rested just barely in the start of the groove of my ass. I glanced over at him, lips slightly parted, a bit of alarm in my gaze, hoping he would take the hint and move his finger.

He did. He nestled it in a little bit deeper, and then Chandler was there and I couldn’t call Stan out on it.

“I heard, but I didn’t really believe until now.” Chandler shook his head. “The disparity in emotional maturity between you two makes this hard to swallow.”

Fuck. Was he just busting chops, or was he seriously onto us?

“Hey, what can I say? She makes me want to act more like a grown-up.” The sincerity in Stan’s tone was so convincing it startled me. Either he was one hell of an actor, or he was feeling the same murkiness I was experiencing.

“In that case, the two of you have my blessing.” He took a glass of champagne and moved on. “Congratulations.”

Once Chandler moved away from us, I disentangled myself from his grip. I wasn’t angry at him, I was angry at myself for getting carried away.

“Do you think we can go soon?” I asked, a bit sullen.

“Um, yeah, sure,” Stan said, confused. I had fended off his advances. I actually wasn’t averse to the idea of sleeping with Stan again—I just didn’t know what to make of those feelings in light of our fake relationship contract.

He chose not to comment on it. We made one final round of the party, which meant I had to slip back into my sweet girlfriend role. It maddened me at how easy it was to take back up. What was this, our third ‘fake’ date? And I was already starting to blur the lines between fantasy and reality.

He held my hand on the way out of the shower, all the way to the elevator. As we rode down in the car, we sort of awkwardly stood apart. Like we weren’t allowed to touch each other without an audience.

As soon as the metal doors slid silently open, he took my hand again. He helped me

get into the limo and then the ride became eerily silent, until I couldn't stand it anymore. He obviously was just going to let the silence fester. I was going to have to do something about it.

“That was more like a ball or a gala than a baby shower.”

Relief spread over his features.

“I know, right? But that's the way they wanted it. One last hurrah before they trade in the tuxes and evening gowns for bibs and spit-up.”

“Yeah,” I said, grinning. “Good luck with your hairless howler monkey. Why would anybody want one of those?”

“Masochists,” he said, clapping his hands together. “Total masochists. Must be the only explanation.”

“I thought masochism involved rubber hoods and weirdly shaped dildos.”

“Sadomasochism, maybe, and I'm not sure what that has to do with kids?”

I gave him a look and shook my head.

“I think it has everything to do with kids—as in the sex act that conceives them. I mean, who am I to judge? Sounds like a victimless hobby to me so long as it's consenting adults, right?”

Stan's grin changed pitch just a bit before he spoke.

“The rumors are Mason and Megan played around with remote control vibrators in public.”

“Yeah, I could see that,” I said. “I mean, I guess you shouldn’t knock it until you try it, right?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

Our laughter was interrupted when the driver rolled down the privacy screen to ask for directions to my building. It wasn't showing up on his GPS for some reason.

Stan walked me all the way up to my apartment, holding my hand the whole way. He didn't let go once we were inside the building, out of sight of the driver. Out of sight of anyone, really.

I kept waiting for him to let go, but he didn't. I wondered if that meant something or not. Maybe I was confused, or he was, or both of us.

"Well, this is me," I said when we got to my door. He let go of my hand at last and I dug into my purse to get out my key. "Thanks. I had fun—um, that is, on our fake date."

"This is the third fake date, right?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You know what they say about the fourth date."

I rolled my eyes.

"Yes, Stan, the fourth date always ends in sex—which is hogwash, by the way—but even if it were true, then it wouldn't apply to a fake date. I mean, the fourth fake always ends in fake sex. Think about it."

"Touche." He touched his heart and smiled to acquiesce the point.

“I did have a good time, though. I do like getting all fancy and doing my nails and stuff on occasion.”

“You were the hottest woman there.”

“Oh, stop,” I said, my cheeks flushing red. “Nobody’s watching. You don’t have to say things like that right now.”

“I don’t have to, no,” he said. His smile faded, and we spent a long time looking at each other before I cleared my throat and changed the subject.

“So what was with that guy from HR with the toupee? I mean, did he expect us not to notice?”

“You know what’s really fucked up?” He took my bait, thankfully. “He actually looks better bald. I mean, I’m serious, his head has this nice aesthetic shape to it, and his skin tone is real even. I don’t know why he covers it up with a rug.”

We both laughed, and then the door up the hall burst open and Mrs. Hickenbottom stuck her curler laden head into sight

“It’s after midnight, do you two think you’re going to be wrapping this up anytime soon or should I take an extra Lunesta?”

“Sorry, Mrs. Hickenbottom,” I said.

“Whatever.” She snorted.

“Good night, Ivy,” Stan said with a warm, wistful smile.

“Good night, Stan.”

He started to turn to leave, but Mrs. Hickenbottom wasn't done meddling.

“Hey, aren't you going to kiss her goodnight?”

Stan stopped. My heart skipped a beat. He turned to me and kind of shrugged, then leaned in and pecked me on the lips.

“What was that?” Hickenbottom snapped. “Are you kissing your mother?”

He cocked an eyebrow at her, and then turned back to me and clutched me to his body. His lips mashed on my own in a hard kiss. Stan's tongue found its way inside and lashed against my own. I was breathless and dizzy when he let me go.

“See you,” he said.

“See you.”

I got into my apartment fast before my legs gave out. No way do you kiss someone like that as a performance.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:48 am

No way.

Chapter Eleven

Stan

The night at the baby shower proved to be a real game-changer. I'm not sure when it happened, or how, but at some point, the lines blurred between our pretend relationship and the real thing.

When we were on the dance floor, I almost said something we both probably would have regretted. I guessed at the time it was a good thing I'd never given voice to the thoughts in my head.

Then, to top it all off, there had been that kiss. Man, what a kiss. For a moment I totally forgot it was a fake relationship. I gave myself over fully to the moment, and Ivy certainly hadn't complained.

When I got back to my place, I wound up sitting on the terrace, staring at the slowly moving traffic below. The city that never sleeps seems like a living thing from up in the air. The slowly moving lights through streets sort of look like blood running through vessels. Brightly lit municipal centers could be seen as brains, handling the higher-order functions.

And somewhere in the middle of it all, all too tiny beings in a world of confusion. Possibly on a collision course to a world of hurt.

I took a puff of my cigar but discovered it had gone out. I didn't bother relighting it. I just looked out over the city some more and pined for Ivy.

We'd been a smash hit at the party. It had been a lot easier to sell everyone on the fact Ivy and I were an item than I'd ever dreamed. Even Chandler seemed to think he was all for it. I supposed that would be a good thing. That is, when it came time to reveal my ruse to everyone and show them that their loves aren't any more real than my fake one.

Only I wasn't feeling fake yearning for my fake girlfriend. I was feeling a very real yearning. I wasn't used to it. I hadn't yearned for much in a long time. Not since I'd made my fortune. Sure, there were things that I wanted, like a controlling interest in Mastercraft Beer, but it's not the same thing as yearning.

I was about halfway through my second glass of scotch when it hit me that I was getting hung up on my fake girlfriend. I laughed it off, then took myself to bed, confident that in the morning, after a good night's sleep, I wouldn't be troubled by such feelings any longer.

Of course, how could I have known I would lay down and start dreaming of her the moment my head touched the pillow?

In my dream we'd been married a while, with kids even, and then one day I came home from work and she was just gone. It had all been pretend anyway, why was I upset?

When I awakened the next day, I was in a foul mood. My yearning for more of Ivy's company corrupted and spoiled as it stewed in my residual anger and resentment. By the time I made it out the door for work, I was almost angry with her.

I got to the building as the sun just peeked above the horizon. I rode the elevator to

the top floor and walked right past her door on the way to my own office. I was tempted to stop and see if she was still in yet.

My assistant beamed a smile at me as I came in the door. Like everyone else, she assumed my fake relationship was for real. I realized I couldn't come drag ass in through the door like a dog who'd been kicked.

People who were fabulously in love didn't act like that. I straightened my posture, put a smile on my face and greeted her warmly.

I found that she had a cup of coffee waiting for me on my desk. That's the weird thing about dating someone. People are so happy for you they start giving you stuff. At least, that's how it is for me. Maybe it's a Pavlovian thing. They think they can encourage my behavior being in line with social norms as long as they give me a reward afterward.

I have to admit, it was damn good coffee. From one of those little food truck places that have become all the rage. I enjoyed the brew and tried to get to work while pointedly not thinking about my pretend, totally fake girlfriend who was in an office not a stone's throw from where I sat.

I needed to talk to her, and about business matters, as well. I needed her to authorize the expenditure of additional funds to finance the pension fund. It was open and shut that she would agree. But technically, going through proper channels, I needed her seal of approval as she was acting in Chandler's stead on that project.

I went ahead and transferred the funds anyway. I didn't want to talk to her, not when my head was all muddled up with fake relationships versus real feelings, and which one I could really count on at the end of the day.

That settled, I headed down a few floors to make a presentation on the Mastercraft

project in front of one of our subsidiary boards. I powered through, despite being quite tired. It was more than physical. I wasn't used to such an emotional wringer as I'd subjected myself to recently.

I hadn't even considered catching the feels for Ivy, but I probably should have. I was going to have to deal with it somehow. I decided the best thing to do would be to not think about it. If I kept acting anxious because I feared getting too close, then our performance wouldn't be convincing.

Or maybe, on the inside somewhere I was afraid to look, I wanted to forget I was just pretending to date her.

I wrapped up the meeting with the subsidiary board, and checked the time. I had a lunch meeting scheduled with the interim project manager—also my fake girlfriend. I was looking forward to it in spite of myself.

I headed across the street for some take-out, since I wanted to get out of the office for a bit. The fresh, crisp air did the trick, as well as the noise and bustle from the street. I felt refreshed and ready for what the afternoon would bring.

When I showed up at her office door with the takeout a few minutes early, she smiled at me but it didn't reach her eyes. I knew something was wrong right away. She shut the door behind us and put her hands on her hips.

“Why did you divert funds into the Mastercraft account without talking to me first?”

“I didn't want to bother you. I knew you were going to approve.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“That’s not the point.” She sighed, and I could tell she was hurt, and deeply disappointed.

“It isn’t the point?” I frowned. “Come on, that’s like jumping out a window to get the key to a locked door, then jumping back in the same window and using it to get out.”

“It is not.” Her glare intensified, and I realized that once again my big mouth had only succeeded in throwing gasoline on the fire.

“Look,” she said, trying to get her tone under control. “I know what you’re getting at, but it does matter. Chandler has software installed to immediately notify him when someone moves funds around with the approval of the project manager or a treasury officer. I interrupted the email before it went on its way to him, but it looks bad, Stan. It makes it look like you’re not respecting my authority.”

“But everyone thinks you’re my girlfriend. They’ll just, you know, probably assume we talked about it outside of work.”

“You’re assuming that people will assume you’d talked to me about it—which you didn’t—because we’re fake dating?” She shook her head, dark clouds gathering in her dark-eyed gaze. “I wouldn’t date a man who went over my head like that. The man I would date would have enough decency to go through the proper channels even though it’s a pain in the ass, to help support me.”

I felt anger bristling inside of me, and struggled to keep it in check.

“Hold on, this isn’t a real relationship. Why do you care if I actually asked you or

not?”

“It might not be a real relationship, but the disrespect you just showed me is real enough.” Her nostrils flared as she fumed with anger. “I’m not backing down on this, Stan. I’ll walk away from our deal, from the money, all of it, before I let you do this to me.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little bit hyperbolic here? It really seems like you’re making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“Mountain out of a molehill? You’re going to try and minimize my concerns with belittling—”

The door swung open, and Jonathon’s silhouette appeared. If he saw us standing there like two angry cats, it might disrupt the entire plan.

Fortunately, Ivy was a faster thinker than I was. She reached out and put her hands on either side of my face, and drew me in for a kiss. When Jonathon fully entered the room, all he saw was the two of us in a lip lock.

I was confused as hell. On one hand, we had been fighting a second before. On the other hand, I wanted to bend her over the desk right then and there. And yet on another, I started to feel foolish, because I knew Ivy was right. I should have gone through the proper channels and hadn’t done so because it was awkward.

“Jonathon,” I said, breaking off the kiss. She had the good grace to give him a sheepish smile.

“Don’t mind me. This can actually wait.”

“No, it’s fine.” I looked at the paper he wanted me to read without really seeing it,

and then signed at the bottom.

“Thanks. You know, you two are really cute together.”

As soon as the door closed behind him, she turned back on her icy demeanor. I knew I had to try and fix things

“I’m sorry. I should have gone through the proper channels. That was stupid and I won’t do it again.”

“Thank you,” she said, relaxing just a bit. Not a whole lot, though. “This whole fake relationship notwithstanding, this interim position is like a job interview for me. I have to do a good job, and that means dotting all the Is, and crossing all the Ts. You understand? I can’t afford to make mistakes, no matter how tiny.”

“I’m sorry I put you in that position. I need to remember that even though I’m paying you to be my fake girlfriend, you’re a very real project manager at work. It won’t happen again.”

“Thank you.”

I knew that I had managed to recover things, more than a little, but I’d done some lasting damage that only time would be able to heal.

At least, I hoped it would be able to heal. I was too annoyed with myself to even question why I had such strong, real emotions over a fake relationship.

Chapter Twelve

Ivy

I was really feeling the push and pull between myself and Stan. His apology soothed my wounded pride, somewhat, but the fact remains that at his first opportunity he tried to circumvent the authority with which I'd been entrusted.

I was looking forward to spending some time with my friends. They didn't associate with anyone from the office, so I wouldn't have to pretend I was dating Stan.

Although it did occur to me I would have to avoid naming him if I wanted to dish. I kept that in mind as I prepared to go out.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

My friend Abigail had set the whole girl's night out up ahead of time. First, we were going to a 'wine and painting' class where we would all get to create our own artwork. Then, it was a short taxi ride over to a Greek restaurant which had rave reviews online. Finally, we would finish it all off with karaoke.

It sounded exhausting to me, but we got to spend so little time together I didn't feel I had a right to complain.

Abigail blew up my phone with texts while I was trying to get ready. I slipped into a pair of designer jeans and a fashionable but inexpensive shirt. If there was going to be paint involved, I didn't want to take any chances of ruining a good outfit.

A short while later I took the stairs down to street level and found Abby waiting in the back of a taxi. Abby stood just over five and a half feet tall, and wore her blonde hair in a short page boy style. She smiled at me as I climbed into the back seat with her.

"Ivy, looking good," she said. "I guess the new job suits you."

"Yeah, except for the infuriating prick who keeps trying to go over my head. You look amazing."

"Thanks."

"How's things in the perfume sales industry?"

"Don't get me started. If I get one more person filling up my inbox because they're an

‘influencer’ and I should give them all our products for free, I’m going to explode.”

“Where are Ginger and Kits?”

“We’re on our way to pick up Ginger from work. Kitty is going to meet us at the painting place, being as she works right across the street.”

“What’s she doing now?”

“Personal trainer. She operates out of the Gold’s Gym next to the painting place.”

“That’s cool. It has to be better than being stuck in an office like she used to.”

“Yeah, we’re not all math nerds who get off on crunching numbers.” She stuck her tongue out at me.

“Careful. Your face will stay that way.”

She rolled her eyes to the roof. “Oh please. Just think of all the bullshit things they used to tell us when we were kids. Like if you swallowed a seed, a tree would grow in your stomach.”

“Oh, and that if you mix pop rocks with soda, your stomach will explode.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “That’s a good one.”

Abby sighed wistfully, her eyes growing distant.

“Dude, I miss pop rocks so much. How come kids get all the cool candy? Adults should get cool candy too, we’re the ones stressed out.”

“I am totally on board with this.”

“Yeah, tell those bigwigs at your fancy firm that you want to start an adult candy company.”

I cocked an eyebrow.

“It occurs to me we shouldn't limit ourselves to candy. What about breakfast cereal?”

“Yes, breakfast cereal—but only if it's loaded with sugar, contains no essential vitamins or minerals, and comes in a cool box with a prize at the bottom.”

I gasped as the taxi pulled out into traffic.

“It's like you read my mind. Only the toy should be adult, too.”

“Now you're talking. Collect all five cock rings—”

I burst into scandalized laughter. “No, you goof. I meant like a vodka lollipop or something like that.”

“I like my idea better.”

“You would, you perv.”

“You’re calling me a perv? I bet you’ve got a dog-eared copy of the Kamasutra under your bed.”

“Nah, more like the Training of O. Doesn’t Ginger still manage that Coffee shop on the upper east side?”

“Yes.”

“So why are we going the wrong direction?”

“She’s working at a different location today. Relax, I’ve been texting her like all day.”

We picked up Ginger, who ironically didn’t have red hair—it changed color to a dark brown when she was about five—and carried on our way toward the painting place.

“Ginger, how have you been?”

“Tired. Tomorrow is my first day off in over two weeks.” She took off her shoe and rubbed her socked foot. “I need a vacation.”

“You want a Tylenol?” I reached into my purse and rummaged around for my bottle.

“No, I’ll be fine.” She shook her head. “I want to drink wine, and not get a stomachache doing it.”

“Hey, Ginger,” Abby said. “What do you think of this idea: adult candy?”

“And breakfast cereal,” I added.

“Oh, I get it. Like cock shaped jolly ranchers? And little nipples and dicks shaped cereal?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Good grief, you’re as bad as Abby. Such a filthy mind.”

“Hey, at least I’m honest about it. Besides, somebody says ‘adult candy,’ shit, pretty much adult anything and where does your mind naturally go?”

“Oh come on—”

Ginger ticked her points off on her fingers.

“Adult book store, adult video, adult—”

“I get the point. It could be that it was a natural progression AND you have a dirty mind, Ginger”

She closed her mouth, considered my point, and then held her finger up.

“Good point.”

The taxi took us to the bar where the painting class was to take place. We ran into

Kit, her hair still damp from a recent shower. I gave her a hug, and then the four of us headed inside. Warmth and laughter enveloped us as we took in the scene.

We got in line to pay for our admission, and soon ensconced ourselves at the four easels set up in the rear. I sipped on Chardonnay and tried to follow the instructor as she taught us how to paint a lake at sunset.

My friends and I kept laughing, however, and I know I missed some of what she said. Not only was I making an ugly-looking painting, but my friends had also decided I'd complained about 'the guy at work' one too many times.

"Okay, that's it," Abby said, staring at me from over her palate. "Why don't you just admit you want to fuck this guy and get it over with?"

"What?" I blurted. "How do you figure I want to sleep with him?"

"She's not wrong, Ivy," Kit added, looking a bit silly with a swipe of paint on the side of her nose. "She's not wrong. You have been protesting too much."

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“If you just do him, then you can get it out of your system,” Ginger said.

“Just do him?” I was laughing so hard the instructor gave us a dirty look. I tried to quiet down. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. He’s sort of in a position of authority.”

“But I thought you were a big shot project manager now. Doesn’t he have to listen to you?”

“Interim project manager, Ginger,” I said, emphasizing the interim part. “And it’s kind of murky. He is supposed to get my approval before he takes certain steps, and the first chance he got he tried to cut me out of the loop.”

“I know you’re angry at him, but that doesn’t mean you still don’t want to sit on his dick.”

“For fuck’s sake, Abby,” I said. “There are children present.”

“No there aren’t, we’re in a bar.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m with Abby on this one.” Kit arched her brows. “You clearly want to bone this dude.”

“Don’t you mean, she wants that dude to bone her?” Abby asked.

“Nobody’s boning anybody,” I blurted. “All right? Can we find another subject to discuss please? I mean, look at how shitty my painting looks compared to the other students.”

“Sorry, Picasso. Maybe you could watch some Bob Ross videos online? You know...”

Abby got a blank look on her face.

“Let’s put a nice happy little tree... right over here. Now don’t tell anyone, it’s our secret.”

“Oh god, that’s awful,” Ginger said.

“Hey,” Kit said, “with Ivy, it’s going to be more like ‘let’s put a nice, happy little cock hiding over here, it looks just like the one I want to sit on.’”

“Please stop.”

After painting, we hit the restaurant, and guess what? They still gave me a hard time about ‘the guy at work.’ I wondered what they would think if they knew the real story. That I was being paid to be a pretend girlfriend to Stan so he could—really own his friends, I guess. I still wasn’t sure what his motivation was, other than a general nihilism about love I happened to share.

Only, I was starting to think that my girlfriends weren’t wrong. Maybe I really wasn’t as cynical about love as I tried to pretend to be.

I was grateful when they ate, because that was a time they couldn’t rib me. After dinner, we went out for karaoke. At last, the noise was too much for them to give me a hard time. Besides, we were having too much fun singing to worry about fucking with me over the guy from work I possibly wanted to bang.

I couldn’t get it out of my mind. Of course there was sexual tension between us. I mean, we’d slept together the first night we’d met, in what was supposed to be a one-

night stand. Just wham, bam, thank you ma'am, and we go back to our regular lives.

Now I was in a long-term agreement with him, as well as working closely with him every day. It was enough to drive anyone buggy. I tried to tell myself that was the reason I felt the way I did. Proximity feelings. You spend a lot of time with someone, you might start to look at them as a natural life partner.

It didn't help that we had to pretend to be in love. I was in doubt about my feelings, and how true they really were, but I wasn't in doubt about my physical desires. I wanted to be with Stan again so much it hurt sometimes.

I tried to relax and have a good time with my friends, but I couldn't stop thinking about Stan and I. Just what was going on between us? I really felt as if our fake relationship was moving rather quickly. Maybe moving into something that wasn't so fake.

And if that were true, I had no idea what I was supposed to be feeling. It tore me up all night, to the point where Abby asked if I needed an Alka-seltzer, due to my sour expression.

After I refused, Abby had another genius idea — and half an hour later all four of us entered the biggest nightclub in the city.

Chapter Thirteen

Stan

My fake, totally pretend girlfriend Ivy was having a girl's night out, giving me a break from the constant turmoil of my maybe-pretend, maybe-not feelings.

I decided I would have a guy's night in, something I rarely got anymore because of

the long hours I worked. With the kind of money I had at my disposal, I naturally had every modern game console known to man, and even a PC some tech nerd set up for me for the same purpose.

If only I had the time. At one point, all of the partners in the firm—Jonathon, Mason, Chandler, and myself—had played together in online shooters and the like. Jonathon had been the first one to stop showing up for our sessions. He was also the first of us to get married. Coincidence? Of course not.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

Especially after Mason soon fell, and Chandler too. Now I was forced to spend my time with a bunch of fourteen-year-olds with names like Noobslayer and Drizzt Do'Urden. I don't know what the fuck that is or how to pronounce it, but I'm pretty sure it's a venereal disease.

Fortunately, if there was one good thing about playing with the junior high crowd, it was that they were highly unlikely to talk to anyone I worked with at the firm. Thus, I sort of let it slip after a while that I was doing the fake dating thing.

"Look, Pwnslayer," I said into the headset as we waited for the respawn. "If you like this girl with the retainer in Chess Club, you're going to have to make the first move. Just don't come on too strong and you'll be alright."

"Aw, what do you know about it, Single4lyfe?" he shot back. "Could you even get chicks if you weren't filthy rich?"

"I got plenty of 'chicks' a long time before I was ever what you would call rich, boy. But hey, don't take my advice, no skin off my nose."

"You just don't understand love," Pwnslayer said into my ear.

"You're probably right about that. Or, maybe, I understand it better than anyone else. Love is temporary insanity boys, mark my words. And soon, all of my married friends are going to learn that."

"How are you going to do that?"

So, I explained the whole fake dating thing, and my endgame. The kids were confused.

“Why would you even want to do that to your friends?”

“Why? Because they’re living their lives with wool pulled over their eyes, that’s why. I’m doing them a favor by showing them that their love isn’t real. It’s just as temporary as the arrangement I have with my fake girlfriend.”

We finally respawned, and that ended the conversation. Only as I was shooting cartoon effigies of people on my big, curved-screen monitor, I couldn’t stop thinking about Ivy. Not shooting her, obviously. I just kept thinking that this thing I’d been trying to set time aside to do just didn’t seem like all that much fun any longer.

I think I played for about an hour and a half longer, just goofing off in my boxers and an old tank top, when I heard someone buzzing on my intercom. I figured it was a delivery, and since I couldn’t pause an online game I decided I would go pick it up momentarily.

Then the buzz came again. It broke my concentration at the worst time and my guy fell into a river of lava. As the skull and crossbones came up on screen, I tossed the controller down on the sofa in disgust and went to answer my door.

“Hold your damn horses,” I griped, wondering how they’d made it past the doorman. I figured it might be some sort of package I had to sign for. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

I threw the door open, anger fueling the motion.

“What’s so damn important—Ivy?”

She glared at me, her face done up as if she'd been to the club. A glaze of sweat on her skin and the unfocused look in her eyes suggested she'd been drinking. Heavily.

"Hey," she said, her expression unchanging. "You got a minute?"

"A minute?" I checked the time, and found it was after two in the morning. "Um, sure, what's going on?"

She sneered at me, pretty face bunching up into a scowl.

"Are you going to invite me in, or make me stand out here in the hallway? I mean, I've really got to pee."

"By all means, come on in." I stepped back and gave her ingress. She walked stiffly in the door, a bit of a sway to her walk.

Ivy turned and jabbed a finger in my chest, hard enough so her nail kind of hurt.

"Hey," she said aggressively, "how come you didn't tell your doorman that you had a girlfriend?"

"Fake girlfriend," I said, and instantly regretted it.

"You know what the fuck I mean," she snapped, poking me in the chest. "You hear me? YOU know what I MEAN."

"I guess I do." She punctuated every word with another poke from her finger.

"Damn skippy you do. How come you didn't tell him? Huh?"

"I guess it just didn't come up."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Didn’t come up, he says.” She leaned into me, her hands splayed on my chest. Her bleary eyes grew softer, and she kissed me on the cheek, standing on her tiptoes to do so. “You’re too fucking tall.”

“How did you get past the doorman?”

“I told him that I was pregnant with your baby, and if he didn’t let me through, I was going to kill all three of us.”

She burst into drunken laughter, and then suddenly grew serious.

“Hey, I really got to pee.”

“Down past the home gym, second door on your right.”

“Home gym?” She looked around my place as if noticing it for the first time. “Jesus Christ on a fuckstick, this place is huge.”

She meandered down the hallway and disappeared into my bathroom. I tried to sort out what was going on. Obviously, she was three sheets to the wind. Why was she at my place?

My forgotten headset squawked as my squad mates screamed at me, wanting to know why I wasn’t backing them up.

“Sorry guys,” I yelled toward the microphone. “Forgot to log off.”

They didn't hear me, but I wasn't all that concerned. I turned around and started the coffee maker. I figured it might help her sober up.

As I fiddled with the filtered water and setting and such, I heard the return of Ivy's footsteps. A moment later, I heard her talking.

"All right, this can't be that hard," she said, putting on the headset and picking up the controller.

"Whoa, is that a chick?" one of the other players asked.

"Chick? Fuck you. I'm dating a billionaire. Do you think I want anything to do with your junior high ass?"

She struggled with the game, making her character run around in circles before dropping a grenade at her own feet. The explosion killed her and she growled in frustration.

"Fuck this stupid game." She tossed the controller down and came over to me. Her angry scowl melted away and she collapsed against me. I held her up in my arms, keenly aware of her soft bosom pressing against my chest.

"Hey," she said sweetly.

"Hey."

"Is that a cue ball in your pocket, or are you happy to see me?"

"I'm always happy to see you," I said, without really thinking about it.

Her eyes widened.

“That was good,” she said, nodding. “That was really good. I almost believe you’re telling the truth.”

With a shock, some part of my mind realized I had been telling the truth. I really did look forward to seeing her.

Ivy traced a line around my chest with her finger. What had been cruel and hard now was soothing and enticing.

“Speaking of maintaining our cover, it occurred to me that we have to have sex, right now.”

“What?” I blurted.

“You heard me. The fourth date always ends in sex, right? So we need to have sex to maintain our cover.”

“We’ve only had three dates.”

“No, we didn’t, we’ve had four. I came over to your place and we played video game, and now you’re going to fuck me.”

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

She groped my crotch, which twitched in response. Normally I'd have been all for an escalation, but in her inebriated state, that would have meant taking advantage of Ivy.

I was a well-known hound dog in my day, and I'm not even going to deny it. I was the guy going home with two women at once in college. I'm the guy who can get any piece of ass on the bar eating out of his hand.

But I'd never make love to a drunken woman. I do have standards. I mean, a little tipsy, sure, but when they're stumbling around it's another story.

"You hear me?" she said. "The fourth date always ends in sex. So show me your bedroom. Let's do this."

"I think you're very drunk," I said.

"So what?"

"So, I think you should drink this coffee and chill out for a bit."

"Oh come on," she pouted, rubbing herself against me. "Are you really going to turn me down? I'll do whatever you want. You can do whatever you want to me. I know what we said before, but maybe I'd be open to something fun and exotic..."

"Okay," I said with a smile.

"Now you're talking," she said. "Come on, let's go screw."

She tried to pull me by the arm, but nearly stumbled and fell. I swept her into my arms and carried her the rest of the way to the bedroom.

“Yeah,” she said. “Shouldn’t I be over your shoulder, though? I mean, if we’re doing this whole caveman thing.”

“Oh, just wait,” I said, laying her down carefully in my bed. I went down and started unsnapping her heels.

“Yeah, get me naked, fake boyfriend, so we can have real sex.” Her spirit was willing, but she laid back with her head on my pillow, eyes struggling to remain open.

“You’ve got it.”

I took off her shoes, and then pulled the blanket up over her.

“Hey, you’re covering me up, why aren’t you taking off my clothes?”

“I did already,” I said, petting her head. “You just forgot.”

“Oh. Then get in here.”

“I will,” I said. “I have to go get the sex toys first, though.”

“Oh yeah, that’s cool,” she said sleepily, her eyes now completely shut. “Handcuffs, ball gags, remote control vibes, oh my...”

Her voice trailed off, and a moment later her loud snore rumbled through the air. I pulled the blankets more completely over her shoulders and brushed a lock of hair away from her smooth cheek.

I had no idea what to make of her showing up drunk. But I still found the sight of her sleeping in my bed to be oddly appealing.

It hit me then that I wasn't going to be able to ignore the very real feelings my fake relationship was brewing in my chest for much longer. Could I really be getting soft spots for a woman?

And if so, what did it mean? Single for life?

I was beginning to have my doubts.

Chapter Fourteen

Ivy

Getting drunk and showing up at Stan's door in the middle of the night might not have been the most thought-out of plans. In fact, I don't think I was thinking much at all. I was only feeling.

And what I felt turned out to be a strong desire to get with him in some capacity. Physically just seemed like the most obvious route. At least, when I woke up in his bed the next day with a hammering hangover, I thought that was my process.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I groaned against the hideously bright light filtering in through the window. I flung an arm over my eyes and tried to will my head to stop pounding.

How much had I even had last night? Just the last half of a bottle of wine, but I wasn't much of a drinker. I realized I was still wearing my clothes and put two and two together.

Not only had Stan not taken advantage of me while I was drunk, but he'd also put me to bed and took care of me. I slowly, carefully pulled my arm away from my eyes, keeping them mostly shut. Even the tiny crack of light that came in through my eyelids seemed like too much.

I eventually got enough gumption to do something extreme. I rolled over onto my back. My head set to hammering again, and it took long moments before the gripping nausea ceased to make my world spin.

I spotted something out of the corner of my eye. There, on his ebony nightstand, rested a bottle of water and a small, fluted cup filled with vitamins and supplements. Some I recognized, like vitamin C. Others I'd never seen before.

A little handwritten note proclaimed 'take me' in front of the cup, and 'drink me' in front of the water. Well, okay then.

I sat up fully in bed, the blankets slipping down to my waist. Wincing against the bright light and the pain of what felt like hot lead searing the inside of my skull, I managed to take the pills and drank half the water in one go.

I sat up on the edge of the bed, still feeling terrible but maybe, marginally, a bit better. I drank the rest of the bottle greedily, the plastic crinkling in my hand.

I heard footsteps out in the hallway. A moment later a gentle knock came at the door.

“Hey, how are you doing?” Stan asked softly.

“Hungover but doing better.”

“May I come in?”

“It's your house.”

He pushed the door open and entered the room. He wore the same boxers and tank top he'd had on the night before, but now he sported some five o'clock shadow. His eyes were lit up with concern.

“Did you take the pills?”

“I did, yes.”

“They'll help. So will the water.”

I grimaced, and he moved in closer.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing, really—you just might not want to be too near me. I probably stink to high heaven.”

“Do you want to take a shower?” he gestured to the bathroom.

“I don’t have anything but these grubby clothes to put on.”

“I’ve got a pair of women’s yoga pants around her somewhere.”

I groaned. “I don’t want to wear the slimy clothes left behind by your previous hookups.”

He chuckled softly, not taking offense.

“That’s not the case here. I ordered athletic gear online and they sent me the wrong thing. I just never bothered to send it back.”

I guess he wasn’t hurting for money.

“All right, thanks. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful.”

“It’s all good.”

He went into his closet and withdrew the leggings in question. They still had the tags on them. Stan added one of his t-shirts to the pile and then caught my gaze.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Why don’t you jump in the shower, and I’ll go work on breakfast. My grilled pork chops and grits will soak up the rest of your hangover.”

I smiled. “That sounds great.”

He went to the door, and I cleared my throat.

“Hey, Stan?”

“Yeah?” he turned around, face crossed with concern.

“Thanks for being... you know, respectful while I was, um, inebriated.”

He smiled.

“Don’t mention it.”

He left, and I stripped out of my dirty clubbing clothes. I stepped into his huge bathroom, vaguely remembering that I’d been in there last night. He had a heated toilet seat, and a hot tub, and a walk-in shower with both a stationary head and one on a long serpentine hose.

I turned on the water and waited for it to heat up before stepping into the stream. I used a squirt of soap in my palm to scrub away the sweat and alcohol stink of the night before. It felt amazing, and it was nothing like the shower I had at home. I adjusted the pulsing head, and let it massage the stiffness out of the small of my back.

“Hey.” I heard a knock at the door. “I just wanted to let you know, breakfast is on the table.”

“Sounds great,” I called.

“I’ll just wait in the kitchen,” he said.

I heard his footsteps start to retreat, and I made a spur-of-the-moment decision.

“Stan?”

“Yeah?” his footsteps returned.

“Do you want to come in here and do my back?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. The bathroom door opened and he appeared. He shrugged out of his clothes, and I got my first good look at his naked body. Stan kept himself in incredible shape. He had a swimmer’s physique, long and lean but chiseled out of marble like a renaissance sculpture.

He pulled the door open, and stepped inside. We shared a smile. His eyes danced up and down my naked body. I lifted my arms over my head and squeezed the loofah, letting suds and water splash over my naked breasts.

“This is going to be the dirtiest shower you’ve ever had,” he said, suddenly close. He took me in his arms, our naked bodies pressing into each other. His lips sought my own. I lifted my chin and he kissed me. Tender at first, then growing hotter than the steamy water shooting out of the nozzle.

I felt a tingle throb through my pussy, sending out waves from my clit to spread into other parts of my body. His hand slid down my back, pinky back in the groove. Only

this time he kept going, grabbing one of my ass cheeks and pulling it aside. He kneaded the flesh, then suddenly slapped me loud enough to pop. I cried out, muffled by his probing tongue as it ruled my mouth.

Stan's other hand dropped to my bottom, and he peeled and pried my cheeks apart. I kneaded the muscles on his chest as his cock twitched against me.

"You're doing a really bad job of washing my back," I gasped.

He grinned, then forced me to turn away from him. He crouched down behind me, using the handheld showerhead to spray off the layer of slick soap. Stan pushed my thighs apart, then I felt his lips on my pussy.

"Oh god," I groaned as his tongue slipped inside. A gasp forced its way out of my mouth as he buried himself in his work. I splayed my fingers onto the tiled wall and bit my lower lip as he suckled my pussy lips one after the other.

He used his mouth to envelop my clitoral mound, bottom lip stroking over the quivering flesh. Stan sucked, hard, and I let out a guttural groan.

"Your pussy tastes good, Ivy," he mumbled into my flesh.

I cried out as he worked fingers inside of me. Three entered my pussy, stretching the dripping wet pinkness out wide in preparation for a throbbing cock. His pinkie used all of that pussy juice to lube up my dark star, and soon he began to invade that as well.

He straightened up, sweeping my wet hair away from my shoulders. Stan leaned in and kissed the back of my neck as he worked his fingers in and out of my holes. I moaned as his teeth sank into my shoulder. Then he kissed his way up to my ear, licked the lobe, and then took it prisoner in a firm bite.

“Do you like that?” He growled in my ear.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Yes,” I groaned.

“You’re a horny little pussy, aren’t you?”

“Oh god yes.” A tremor ran through my pussy. “Fuck me, please.”

“I am fucking you, with my fingers.”

“Fuck me with... ooooh... your cock. Please.”

I felt temporary disappointment as he removed his fingers from my body, but then I felt the big, warm crown of his cock pressed against my dripping wet pussy. I leaned into him, grinding my ass into his crotch, trying to get him to stick it in me.

Slowly, he invaded my pussy with his massive rod. I groaned as it stretched me, filling me up. His hands slapped to either side of my hips. Stan thrust into me, and I let out a sharp cry. It felt so good as his cock moved in deep, then drew out, then moved in deep again.

I pressed myself into him. Hands scrabbling on the slick wall, I’d have probably fallen but he had me pinned against it with his body. Stan’s hand swept up my hip, to my belly, and then finally grasped my breast tightly. He manipulated and formed my soft, pliant flesh to his whims, all the while keeping up a steady, slow, but powerful rhythm of fucking my wet pussy.

The narrow walls of the shower stall echoed with my moans and cries, and his guttural, animalistic grunts and growls of ecstasy. I wanted him to vent his pleasure

on my body. I wanted to be his sex object, in that moment.

He slapped his thighs into my ass, his cock penetrating deep. In that position, his balls swung in and smacked my clitoral mound every time he thrust back in. I was carried on a wave of rhythm which bore me aloft toward the precipice of a truly momentous orgasm.

“Oh god,” I cried. “I’m cumming! I’m cumming, I’m cumming, I’m cumming.”

Did I mention I usually don’t get vocal? I’m embarrassed to ask for what I want, probably like most people. But with Stan, it felt like it was okay to go ahead and be overtly sexual.

Oddly, I hadn’t thought of the fake nature of our relationship at all, since he’d entered the bathroom.

He strained against me, his teeth gritted as he let out an animalistic groan. Stan came hard in my pussy, filling me with his hot spunk.

I turned around, his hard cock sliding out of me. We clung to each other, kissing and sighing as I felt the tremors pass through my body.

Once I’d somewhat recovered, we soaped each other up and washed again. It was kind of funny, though, because my efforts to clean his cock resulted in it getting hard as a rock again, which led to him fucking me with it again, which led to us having to wash again—

I mean, sure, it took almost forty-five minutes to take that shower, but I don’t think either of us was in a mood to complain.

Chapter Fifteen

Stan

I fell asleep curled up around Ivy. Her cheek rested on my bicep as if it were a pillow. My member nestled between her rounded cheeks, and I'd swept her hair off the back of her neck to avoid waking up to a mouthful of it.

I awoke, feeling as if several hours had passed. Ivy had rolled over onto her back, my hand now resting on her belly. Her mouth hung open and a line of drool ran down her chin, making me laugh softly. I wasn't disgusted, for some reason. It was endearing and I couldn't figure out why.

I carefully rolled out of bed so as not to disturb her and then headed into the bathroom. My mouth felt parched as the most arid of deserts. Sex always did make me thirsty. I padded, naked, into the kitchen and got myself a glass of cold water from the filtered faucet.

I drained one glass, then refilled it and turned around to find that Ivy stood right behind me.

"Damn it," she said. "I was trying to sneak up on you—oh, is that for me? Thanks."

She wore a shit-eating grin as she took the glass from my hand and drank half of it in a matter of a few seconds.

"I don't know why, but that's the best glass of water I ever had."

"I have a specialty filter that magnetizes the water for proper balance."

"Of course you do. Am I going to get superpowers from drinking the magnetized water?"

I chuckled and put my hands at her waist. I could feel her body heat radiating off of her in waves.

“No, but you might find your overall health improves.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

Our eyes met, and I could tell neither of us was really thinking about the water. A ton of things were left unsaid. Like what our sleeping together again meant for the future of our fake relationship. Had it been casual sex? Or was there a deeper meaning?

The real conundrum that toasted my brain was this: did I want it to have a deeper meaning or not? I was afraid of the answer, so I tucked the query away into a distant part of my mind and focused on more immediate concerns. Like the beautiful, naked woman in front of me.

Something akin to relief washed through her features as I leaned in for a kiss. Finally, the awkward moment had passed. We had chosen not to talk about feelings at all. On the one hand, it felt like a huge relief to me, too.

On the other hand, I couldn't help but remember what my old man had said before my parents split. If you choose not to decide, then you're still making a choice.

I think part of me knew that it was a bad idea to leave all those things unsaid in pursuit of a physical connection. I guess I figured that if it was all fake, and I couldn't have her heart and soul for real, then at least I could have her body, and maybe that would be enough.

Our lips met softly at first. This was more paced, more deliberate than our earlier energetic encounters. I wanted to take my time, enjoying every sweet kiss and tender caress. I swept my hand up along her cheek as I kissed her, then back to gently thread fingers through her hair. I stroked and petted her, my other hand sweeping along the natural sculpture that was her gorgeous back.

She planted her palms on my chest and pushed away enough that our lips parted. Ivy looked up at me, and I saw the lights reflected in her dark umber gaze. I saw fear in that gaze, and hope, and desire, and something I couldn't give a name to.

“What?” I asked softly, my hand caressing her cheek. My thumb smoothed away a stray hair stuck to her lower lip. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she lied. I knew it wasn't nothing. I should have put a stop to things then and had it out with her, or at least acknowledge that we were both catching the feels. Instead, I let her pull me back into her kiss.

My heart thudded in my chest. Desire for her burned in me so bright it overlapped my more tender feelings. I gave myself over to the moment, reveling in the physical intimacy rather than the emotional intimacy I craved.

Suddenly I felt a thread of guilt worming its way into my hyper-aroused state. I'd put her in this position of faking a relationship with me. I was the architect of all our woes, and for what? So I could prove to my friends that love was fake? What was I even doing?

I tried to assuage my conscience with the fact I hadn't made her any promises, or told her I loved her or anything like that. That meant neither of us had any illusions. Save one.

The illusion that we were not falling head over heels for each other.

I wanted to make her feel good. I pushed her back slowly into the counter. My hands slid down and clutched her under the buttocks. She let out a gasp as I lifted her up and placed her naked bottom on the kitchen counter.

She looked at me, eyes full of wonder. Her smooth palm felt amazing as it slid down

my cheek. The look in her eyes, that mix of desire and yearning, so much mirrored what I felt in my own soul that I wanted to cry.

I kissed her instead, and she embraced me, fingers weaving through the hair at the back of my head. I moved my lips to her neck, then her chest, and worked my way over to her nipple. I enveloped the nipple in my mouth, using my tongue to flick along the hardening nub.

I moved over and carefully kissed and suckled her opposite nipple, before moving over her stomach. Ivy laid back on the counter, gasping as I kissed my way between her thighs. I let my breath linger over her glistening pussy, then moved my mouth over to her inner thigh. I kissed the sensitive skin there as her hands played with my hair.

At last I moved my mouth into her pussy. I mouthed her inner labia, suckling and licking gently. She let out a sharp gasp when I moved over and enveloped her outer lips with my mouth. I sucked hard, moving my head and stretching her flesh out like taffy.

Guided by her moans, I moved up, my tongue tracing circles around—but not quite touching—her clit. I worked two fingers easily inside her dripping wet pussy and writhed them around. She groaned, straining her body against me as if seeking deeper penetration. I pulled my fingers out long enough to trace a glistening coat onto her clitoris with the lightest of touches.

I blew on her clit, and watched it stiffen. Her nails dug into the back of my head. I grinned and blew again, making sure it was nice and chilled, before taking it inside my warm mouth.

I used my tongue to play over the little lady, all the while suckling with my lips and working fingers into her pussy and ass. I had two fingers in her dark star, and four in

her pussy soon enough, and I worked them in alternating thrusts while suckling hard on her clit.

Her scream pierced the air, nails digging so hard into me it hurt. She left four parallel red lines curling around my shoulder to my neck. I kept it up until she squirted in my face. I kept licking her, slowing down my finger thrusts as she writhed and trembled on top of the counter.

She gasped, arching her back, as I stood up fully and caressed her still quivering pussy. A smile was born on her lips when I took her by the hands and lifted her into a sitting position.

I pulled her into my arms and carried her into the living room. I laid her down on top of the big, fluffy rug in the middle of the floor and knelt down beside her.

Ivy bit her lower lip as she stared at me with hungry eyes. Her hand darted out and grasped my shaft, giving it long, smooth strokes. I groaned as she worked me over, until I couldn't stand it any longer.

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away, then climbed between her thighs. Ivy arched her back, thrusting her pussy into the proximal spot for penetration. My cock throbbed like crazy as I pushed the crown between her gleaming wet lips.

I let out a groan from behind gritted teeth as I slid all the way inside of her.

“Oh yes,” I hissed. “Your pussy is so nice and sweet and tight.”

Ivy wrapped her legs around the small of my back, crossing her ankles. She pulled me into her, encouraging deeper, harder thrusts. Our bodies came into that perfect synchronicity of which so many speak. We moved just right, in concert and searching for the ultimate pleasure.

“Oh god,” she moaned, her nails raking down my chest. “Yes... right there.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“You like that, baby?” I gasped out between heavy pants. Sweat rolled off our bodies, mingling in the air with the smell of her wet pussy.

“Yes,” she cried. “I love it.”

“I love it, too,” I groaned. “I love it too—”

I couldn’t hold back any longer. I strained against her body, my eyes shut tight against the stinging sweat and the moment of sublime ecstasy where I shot my seed into her pussy. She broke over the threshold of a thunderous orgasm, screaming as she flopped about like a landing fish pinned beneath my body.

I fell on top of her and she clung to me with all four limbs. She continued to gasp and moan as orgasmic pulses of pleasure shot through her body. Her eyes rolled back and her mouth went slack as she turned to jelly, only moving when another pulse rocked her naked body.

I laid beside her on the carpet, one leg entwined with her own, cradling her against me. One hand stroked her long, dark hair. The other petted her pussy gently, spreading those sensations up and out through her core and into the rest of her body.

I kissed the top of her head, holding her close to me as she drifted on the currents of post-orgasmic bliss. I thought she looked particularly beautiful that way, and I could have laid there and watched her all night.

Soon I carried her sleepy form back to bed, and we fell into a deep slumber entwined in each other’s embrace.

My dreams, if I had them, didn't trouble me on waking. I rolled over in the cold gray light of dawn, hoping to put my hand on Ivy's warm body.

Instead, I touched only a bare mattress. I rolled over fully and opened my eyes. Ivy was nowhere in sight.

"Ivy?" I got out of bed, bare feet on the tiled floor. I checked my entire condo, and came up empty. Ivy was gone, including her dirty clubbing clothes.

I sat down on the sofa in the living room, staring around at my condo.

"Funny," I said to the stillness, "this place didn't used to feel so... empty."

Chapter Sixteen

Ivy

I don't know why I left Stan's place in the middle of the night, exactly. I guess I got spooked. That might be the best way to put it. I got scared because things were starting to seem just too real.

All of it went back to the way I'd been feeling before I'd taken the first sip of whiskey. I had been unable to get Stan off my mind for hours, and since I was at the nightclub anyway, I'd tried to drink away all thoughts of him.

Yeah, not a very good plan, that one. Instead of winding up passed out, like I wanted to, I'd impulsively hopped in a cab and headed over to his place instead. Why? Because my drunken brain figured that if I slept with Stan, it would dispel all of the lingering sexual tension and I might be able to go on about my life. Well, go on with it as much as possible with our fake relationship contract.

So I'd done what I often do, I ran away from even the hint of emotional intimacy. After the night we'd shared, I just knew if I woke up in his arms in the cold light of dawn I'd have to acknowledge my feelings for him. Instead, I'd chosen to forfeit the game. I'd left him all alone and returned to my own bed to not sleep. All alone.

All alone hits differently after you've spent time with another body curled up around your own. I didn't like the feeling of sleeping alone, to be honest, and that made me worry most of all. I wondered if I were really catching the feels for Stan at all, or if I were really just lonely and bored.

The confused jumble in my heart and soul became a veritable Gordian knot, which I could not hope to untie. So I just let it sit there and stayed awake until my alarm went off.

I rose and showered, remarking to myself that this activity wasn't nearly as much fun alone as it had been with a friend. Or fake boyfriend.

Fake relationship. I was beginning to wonder what that even meant anymore. When I thought about it, a lot of relationships were fake. I knew that my cousin Jamie had married a man she once bullied in high school for his money, but from what I could see they were perfectly happy with each other. Maybe all relationships are fake.

A chill went down my spine in spite of the hot water when I had a sudden thought. What if all, or at least most, relationships started off more or less fake and then deepened into something more real?

After the shower, I put on some casual, comfortable clothes and waited outside for my sister Irene and her family to pick me up. I soon saw their blue and gray minivan rolling up.

"Hi," Irene said with a cheerful wave from the passenger seat. "The door's

unlocked.”

I grabbed the big sliding door’s handle, but the thing hated me and refused to open.
“Are you sure it’s unlocked?”

“Yeah, that’s what it says here.” I heard a succession of clicks as she hit the master control switch. “It’s unlocked.”

I tried it again, and felt it give just a bit. I yanked hard, making my shoulder hurt, and managed to pull it open fully.

“There you go,” Irene said. I climbed into the back, where Christian sat playing with a handheld video game.

“How are ya doing, Christian?”

“I’m trying to beat Dark Souls III,” he said stiffly. “It takes supreme concentration.”

“Well, you might not know this, but your aunt Ivy was a Ms. Pac Man champion back in the day.”

His little guy on the screen died, and he grimaced in disgust. He glared up at me.

“Geez, you’re old,” he said.

I gasped, and quicker than a hiccup my sister’s arm darted into my field of vision. She snatched the game console out of his hands.

“Hey,” he said.

“That’s what you get for having a smart mouth. Apologize to your aunt, and maybe you’ll get it back after dinner.”

“After dinner? That’s not fair.”

“I could just keep it in the glove compartment until your next birthday.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Ivy,” he said snidely.

“Say it like you mean it.”

He looked up at me and got puppy dog eyes.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Ivy.”

“I accept your apology. You know I’m not even thirty, right?”

“Yeah, but I don’t trust anyone over thirteen.”

I sighed and gave up. I figured his apology was as much as I could hope for.

We got to mom and dad’s place on Staten Island. I watched my sister and her family make their way inside and up the steps. I wondered what it would be like to have a family. Would it be stifling, or would it feel like being wrapped in warm kittens all day long?

All I knew was, the more I spent time with her and her family the more I wondered about my feelings for Stan. Maybe it was a maternal instinct, but I began to think that, maybe, Stan might be a good father.

I shook it off, admonishing myself silently as I followed my sister and her family as they made their way up the steps to the second-floor apartment. It was a fake relationship, I reminded myself. A fake relationship. There was no reason to think such thoughts. In fact, I wanted to think of just about anything else at the moment.

Upstairs, my mother and father hugged me warmly, cheerful smiles on their faces. I’d developed a habit of late with my father, where I carefully checked his face and eyes for signs of infirmity. He was losing weight, which I knew was supposed to be a good thing.

Yet, I looked at him and couldn’t help but feel as if he was becoming diminished, somehow. All of my memories of my father were of this big, burly man. Sound of

body and mind, tougher than a two-dollar steak, as he was fond of saying.

Now he looked old, and frail, and it reinforced to me once again how important it was that I see the whole fake relationship thing with Stan through to the bitter end. No matter how awkward, or even painful, things got, I had to stick it out. I had to stick it out for my family.

“What’s wrong?” Dad asked, his smile fading. I guess my anxiety was written large all over my face.

“Nothing, I’m just a little winded,” I said.

“You don’t look like you got much sleep.” My mother came to me and turned my face this way and that.

“Mom, come on,” I said “I’m a grown-ass adult, quit inspecting me like a child.”

“Have you considered adding a teaspoon of cod liver oil to your diet?” She asked. “Three times a day, it will help you flush all those impurities that give you bags under your eyes.”

I covered my face with my hand.

“Are you kidding me, Mom? I just didn’t get much sleep last night, that’s all. I don’t need to take cod liver oil.”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“I bet I know why she’s tired,” Isabelle said with a smirk. My cheeks flushed, and Iris elbowed her in the side.

“Hush your mouth.”

I looked between the two of them. “Just what are you talking about? Fess up or I’m going to make like Jack Dempsey and beat it out of you.”

Isabelle rolled her eyes.

“Oh god, we just heard through the grapevine that you had a new man in your life. Some guy at work, right?”

I sighed, groaning with despair. Now my parents knew about Stan, even if they didn't know the grisly details.

I would now be stuck role-playing this fake relationship shit around my own family, too.

“You’re dating someone?” My mother asked, delight brimming in her tone. “Oh my god, oh my god, sit down, sit, sit, sit.”

I sat at the kitchen table. The rest of my family loomed around me, almost like they were on the other side of an interrogation chamber. I know they were just trying to be interested in my life, but I felt like it was a very adversarial type of situation.

No wonder I felt like getting my back up.

“Tell us all about him,” Mom said, her eyes eager.

“Does he have a job?” My father asked.

“Is he a convict?” Christian asked. His mother smacked him on the elbow.

“One more strike, young man, and I’m donating that video game in the glove box to those less fortunate.”

“Mom, it was just a joke.”

“Is anybody laughing?”

I rolled my eyes and turned to my father.

“Yes, he has a job.”

“That’s good, at least.”

“How long have you been seeing him? When did you guys meet?” Mom asked.

“One question at a time, Ma, geez.” Iris said.

“Only a few weeks, and we met at a party celebrating the acquisition of a new company at the firm.”

“So he is a guy from work.” My mother frowned. “If things go bad with the relationship, he might think it's awkward to see you at work.”

“Oh, believe me, mom,” I said with a knowing smirk. “That’s not going to be a problem.”

The relationship, the fake relationship that is, was most definitely going to go bad at some point. But that was by design. That way Stan could really stick it to his friends. Or something. To be honest, I didn't really get his motivations.

I knew he wanted to think of himself as some kind of impenetrable fortress of raw intellect, who refused to be assailed by the weak armies of emotional connection. Yet, I was starting to feel increasingly intimate to him—and not in the obvious way.

I'd begun thinking of us, without conscious effort, as being together for real whenever I made plans. When I shopped for a new shade of lipstick, I wondered if Stan would like it on me. When I considered where to go to vacation for next year, I looked at places where I thought Stan might feel welcome.

“That's what they all say. Everybody thinks they've got 'real' love and the rest of us can never understand.” Mom sighed. “Love is a verb, my dear. It takes hard work. It's a way of life, more than just some kind of effusive state of being.”

“Geez, Grandma, you sound like an old kung fu guy.”

Irene glared at him and Christian shrank back.

“I only meant she sounded wise.”

“Grandma is wise,” My father said, putting his arm around her. “Now, let’s all back up and give poor Ivy some space to breathe. I’m sure she’ll tell us all about her new boyfriend whenever she’s ready.”

He gave me a wink, and I gave him a relieved smile. My fake boyfriend had just entered my off-work life, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it.

All I knew was, there would be a lot of disappointed people in my family when the fake relationship ended. I’d been only thinking of myself getting hurt the whole time. The fact that my family was getting dragged into the mess and caught in the crossfire didn’t sit well with me.

It didn’t sit well at all.

Chapter Seventeen

Ivy

The sun rose as a cheerful yellow blob, shining down its heavenly grace on the city. I wanted to be free to enjoy the gorgeous morning, but my inner turmoil wouldn’t let me.

All the things my family had said at dinner the other night stirred up a lot of emotions for me. I had, on some level, accepted that I wasn’t just in danger of getting the feels anymore. I already had the feels, and I strongly suspected—or perhaps just

wished—that Stan felt the same.

Now I had to ask him to my family's dinner to maintain the ruse. I figured he would probably say yes. It would make us look all the more convincing if he had dinner with my folks. At the very least, I knew he treated that like a priority.

I laid out my clothes for the day, deciding I wanted to look alluring. I almost never dress that way at the office. I paired a taupe and charcoal-hued blazer with a pencil skirt and stockings. I imagined myself sitting on Stan's desk, and the way he might be able to see the lacy tops of the stockings and what that might lead to.

My smile faded. This was part of the problem. Trying to treat the relationship like it was real. I didn't feel bad about inviting him to my family's dinner. At least, I told myself that I didn't feel bad. Our fake relationship had benefited him at work, why shouldn't it benefit me at home by proxy?

I powered through my morning, hoping to catch Stan around lunch to make my pitch. I wondered why I felt so invested in what his answer might turn out to be. It was a fake relationship after all.

Meeting the folks was a big deal. It was supposed to be, anyway. Here he was about to meet up with my huge, smothering Brooklyn family, and I didn't know much about his family at all. I'd asked a couple of times, but he'd never really answered.

I resolved to change that as soon as possible. But only after I'd asked my favor. The last thing I wanted to do was to start a fight.

I finished up my work about a quarter until noon and walked down the hall to Stan's office. I caught him on a phone call. He smiled as I entered and waved me in. His eyes moved up and down my body as I sauntered up to his desk. I enjoyed the way he stared at me, his eyes filled with desire.

“Of course I’ve crunched the numbers. Jonathon,” he said. “I’m telling you, there’s no way in hell the Saints are beating the spread. They haven’t in fifteen years. That’s a decade and a half, man.”

So, he wasn’t on a business call at all. I figured that gave me free rein to fuck with him. I perched my bottom on the edge of his desk and smiled down at him. My fingers toyed with his necktie, flipping it around and smoothing away nonexistent wrinkles.

“Yeah, you’d better believe I’m not betting on them to beat it this year.” His eyes remained locked on my legs. I scooted over and spread my thighs, flashing him a shot of my panties.

His eyes nearly bulged out of his head.

“If you say so, but the last time I, um, the last time I invested my hopes in the Dolphins I was... just devastated.” His gaze was locked between my legs. “Totally devastated.”

I slipped off the desk, allowing the edge to draw up the hem of my skirt. I shook my bottom a little, showing off my lace thong, and then got down on my knees and clambered under his glass desk.

“Yeah, I think it’s a big deal,” Stan said as I mouthed his cock through his trousers while my hands fumbled with his belt buckle. “A real, real big... deal.”

The phone slipped away from his ear enough I could hear Jonathon’s voice more clearly.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you getting your cock wet or something?”

I chuckled as Stan's face turned beet red.

"Haha, mother fucker, you're hilarious. Listen, I've got to go, my lunch is here."

He ended the call and stared down through the glass table at me as I maneuvered his hardening rod out of his boxers.

"You're a miscreant," he said with a grin.

"You can always punish me for it later," I purred. I made eye contact and then ran my tongue up the underside of his veined, throbbing member. He grew ever harder as I worked my way to the very tip.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I gripped his shaft and ran my tongue all over the crown. I loved the way he looked at me when I had his cock in my mouth. Appreciative, maybe even adoring, and turned on as all hell. I was always kind of a tomboy growing up. Guys never looked at me the way they did at my sisters, who were all girly and shit.

Having this rich dude who could have anyone he wants staring at me like I'm everything he could ever want was better than any drug, and maybe even rivaled the actual sex that came after.

No pun intended.

I took his entire crown in my mouth and stared up at him through the table. Slowly, I took as much of him inside me as I could manage, gagging a bit at the end but managing to pack my mouth with cock.

I dragged off, suckling hard all the way. When I pulled off the end, he came in my mouth. I licked his rod clean and then smiled up at him.

“Did you like that?”

“Oh god, what do you think,” he gasped. “That’s the best blowjob I’ve ever had.”

“You’re not setting the bar very high,” I said, cocking an eyebrow. “I mean, I didn’t use half my tricks.”

His eyes bulged out of his head.

“You should come with a warning label.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said, blinking prettily up at him from my knees.

“It was meant as one.”

I still held his shaft in my hand. I started stroking him off, and his gaze grew intense.

“Don’t just stroke my cock, Ivy. Sit on it.”

He rolled back enough that I could crawl out from under the desk without hitting my head on the glass bottom. I stood up in front of him, leaning over, my hands on his muscular thighs.

“Hike up your skirt,” he said. I did as I was told, inching it up bit by bit and exposing my legs. He reached up and hooked a finger in the thin band of material at my crotch. With one quick jerk, he ripped it away, causing me to gasp from the sudden exposure.

“I’ll buy you ten new pairs,” he said.

I wasn’t worried about it. I lifted one leg and straddled his lap. My legs threaded through the armrests of his seat. I grabbed his cock and held it steady as I eased myself down onto his lap.

My eyes squeezed shut as his big rod stretched me. I gasped as I settled fully into his lap, my hands on his shoulders. Our eyes met and he reached up to clutch at my breasts.

I swiveled my hips, moving like the sea at storm. Stan’s teeth clenched, a low growl escaped his throat. I could feel him trying to hold back, trying not to cum right away. My mischievous side sprang to life.

I moaned loud, writhing and gyrating and riding his cock for all I was worth. Stan couldn't handle it. I felt his hot spunk spray up inside of me. His cock didn't go soft, though. Not with me bouncing up and down on it.

His fingers tore at my blazer, pulling it aside and attacking the buttons of my blouse. Soon my translucent lace bra was on full display. He had bought that bra for me, and I noted the appreciation on his face. It featured a front snap, which may have had something to do with it.

The petal-like bra cups fell aside, revealing my naked breasts to him. His lips enveloped a nipple, suckling like a greedy infant. A deep, guttural moan escaped my throat as he grasped my breast, feeding it into his mouth.

His chair rolled across the floor, carrying us with it. We bumped up into the raised dais near a longed section with a coffee table and flatscreen monitor built into the tabletop. Did I mention his office was bigger and better than mine?

He locked gazes with me, my beast popping out of his mouth.

“Hang on tight, baby.”

I wondered what he meant, until he began to rise. I could feel his powerful thigh muscles flexing as he easily lifted both of us into the air. I wrapped my legs around him as soon as I was able, his cock bending near the base as it remained nestled inside of me. The changes in position and pressure forced me over the edge of a climax.

I struggled to cling to him as my body spasmed with pulses of ecstasy. Stan settled me down on the cushions of a leather upholstered sofa. Then he loomed over me, muscles in his chest rippling as he planted his hands on either side of my head.

Stan rocked his hips forward, eliciting a wail which trailed off into a moan. It felt so good, all I could do was gasp and pant and whimper as he murdered my pussy with his thick cock.

He strained against me, fingers digging furrows into the cushions beside my head. His index finger snagged a lock of hair, tugging it painfully but I was in a mid orgasmic scream and the pain translated to pleasure.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Oh god,” I groaned, eyes squeezing shut as another series of pulses thundered through my body. Sweat flung from his glazed and glistening body every time he threw himself into another powerful thrust. His teeth clenched, his eyes burned into my own. He gave himself over to his desire fully, and I came right when it happened.

He bore down on me as I cried and writhed and moaned. I lost all control of my body, flopping around underneath him like a severed live wire. He cried out as he came, filling me with more of his seed.

Stan collapsed on top of me, and suddenly we were just holding each other, clinging in a mad, desperate way. I’m not sure, but I think he may have sobbed a couple of times. I know I did. It was a strange moment, and we both were kind of embarrassed when it passed.

He made a point to get up and act all cavalier, like it was all casual. Like we hadn’t gone at it like rabbits in season on Viagra laced cocaine.

“Hey,” I said as he poured us both a glass of his fancy magnetized water. My voice was a bit hoarse from all the screaming during orgasm. I decided it was a good problem to have.

“Yes?” Anxiety danced with something I couldn’t recognize in his gaze.

“One thing led to another, and now my parents think we’re dating for real, too.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “It can’t hurt the plan. It can only help it.”

My face scrunched up into a scowl at the mention of his vaunted plan, but I think I wiped it off my face before Stan noticed.

“Well, my parents really want to meet you. I hate to ask, but do you think you could come to my family dinner this weekend? It would go a long way to keep my parents off my back.”

“Um, sure,” he said. “It’s the least I can do, considering how hard you’ve worked to convince the guys.”

I smiled, and sipped my water, and tried to pretend like I wasn’t dying a little inside, wondering how it was all going to end.

Chapter Eighteen

Stan

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror at the office, knotting a new tie in place after an unfortunate encounter with Szechuan sauce. I was grimacing in anger because it was the same tie I’d planned to wear to Ivy’s parents’ house.

Someone breezed into the bathroom, wearing a dark purple blazer, fedora, and somewhat baggy dress pants to match the blazer.

“Jack, what the hell are you doing in here? This is the men’s room.”

“I knew you were in here alone, and I knew you were finished with your, ahem, business.” She grinned, showing off a diamond filling in her front tooth. “So, meeting the parents tonight, from what I hear.”

I wasn’t surprised that our resident on-staff private eye had heard about my upcoming

dinner with Ivy and her family. I'd been certain to mention it a lot during the workweek. It was just another layer of deception. Just another thread in the tangled web I wove around my foolish cohorts.

But I had to admit that the idea of meeting her parents had me a bit anxious and worried. To say I was not familiar with either of those sensations was an understatement.

“Yes, what of it?”

“It's a big step.” She turned around and leaned on the sink beside mine. “I mean, the next logical step is you popping the big question, right?”

“The next logical step? It's dinner with her parents.” I felt defensive, and tried to keep it out of my tone and off my face. Jack was very intuitive, and I wanted to protect myself from her keen perceptions.

“Yes, but I can count the number of times that you've gone to dinner with the parents of a woman you were sleeping with on... hmmm.... ” She pretended to get very thoughtful, the jerk. “Zero fingers. It must be getting serious.”

She elbowed me in the ribs, and I sighed.

“Maybe it is getting serious. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“You're Stan the Man. The eternal bachelor. The last man standing, the only one of your friends left who hasn't gotten married.” Jack shrugged. “Go figure, I took you at your word, that you would never bother with such frivolities as the human heart.”

I shrugged and tried to move around her. She took a step to the side to block my path.

“In all seriousness, though, are you really into this chick?”

“Yeah, I’m really into this chick.” I stepped around her again and exited the bathroom. She followed me down the hallway.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“That’s just it, though. You don’t get soft spots for chicks. You get hard spots. You guys hooked up at a party and suddenly you’re dating? I’m just saying the trajectory of all of this has moved really fast.”

I got to the elevator, and thankfully she didn’t follow me into it.

“Just saying.” She offered a shrug as the doors slid shut. I rode down to the lobby, because the truth was I was just trying to get away from Jack and really needed to get back to my own office.

I finished up my work for the day, splashed on a bit of cologne, brushed my teeth carefully, and headed over to the interim project manager’s office.

“Hey,” she said. “You look great.”

“Thanks. You look even better.”

She beamed at the compliment. I thought about what Jack had said, and felt a stab of guilt. I pushed it aside.

“I’m ready to meet your parents.”

“Okay, here’s the deal,” she said. “There are certain things you can’t talk bad about around my parents.”

“Okay. I’d been intending to avoid the usual, religion and politics.”

“In my parent’s case, you need to avoid anything positive said about the St. Louis Cardinals or the Dallas Cowboys. It will set my father off and we’ll have to listen to him go off on an hour-long diatribe on why they’re a bunch of cheats who don’t deserve all their world championships.”

I laughed and nodded. “Fair enough.”

“In my mother’s case, don’t bring up anything about zoning laws—my mother will get triggered by that—and you also need to avoid saying you don’t like her two favorite movies.”

“Which movies are those?”

“Joe versus the Volcano, and Titanic. I know, don’t even get me started, but she loves those movies.”

“Duly noted. I’ll make sure to avoid even bringing them up, and if the subject does arise, I’ll wax nostalgic about the supposed plot of the former, and the low caliber acting of the latter.”

“To be fair, the ship was the best actor in the movie. You know that my sisters and I worked it out and decided there was no way they couldn’t have shared that stupid door—oh my god.”

She slapped her hands to the side of her face.

“I forgot all about my sisters. Okay, Iris and Isabelle are okay, but Irene has been a little bit uptight ever since Christian turned ten and became kind of a little punk.”

I laughed, thinking back to my own youth.

“That’s an awkward age. Not a little kid any longer, but not ready to go through puberty either.”

“Hopefully he’ll be on his best behavior.”

We left the building and took a limo to her parent’s place on Staten Island. I cocked an eyebrow when the limo parked outside of a dry cleaning/tailor shop.

“Is your parents’ place further down the street?” I asked.

“No, it’s up in the air.” She pointed to the second story of the tailor shop.

She led me to a glass door beside the entrance to the tailor shop. Ivy pulled it open and beyond it was a sudden, steep stairwell. We took it up, the smells of home cooking enveloping me as we went. There was something oddly comforting about the aroma. I dined in fine restaurants all the time, but there’s just something about a meal that’s been specially prepared for people the chef loves.

We hit the top of the stairs and she opened another door. Now we were in a kitchen, surprisingly large but crowded with a woman I took to be Ivy’s mother, as well as two others who had to be her sisters. I assumed that the burly man with a balding pate had to be her father.

“Hello,” her mother said. She handed a pair of oven mitts to a sister I took to be five years or so older than Ivy. “Irene, can you check the scallop potatoes for me? Thanks.”

Ivy’s mother came up to me, smiling ear to ear.

“Hi, you must be Stan.” She offered me a wizened hand. “I’m Dolores, Ivy’s mother.”

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “And here I thought you were one of the sisters.”

“Oh, stop,” she said with a laugh. Suddenly, her father bellied up to the bar, so to speak.

“Hello, Stan,” he said, thrusting his hand out. “I’m Kyle, Ivy’s father.”

“It’s a pleasure and an honor to meet you, sir.”

He grunted. “Anyway, that’s Irene there, taking the casserole dish out of the oven, beside her is Isabelle, and I don’t know where Iris has gotten off to.”

“I can’t wait to meet her.”

I went around shaking hands, except for with Iris, who insisted on a hug. Soon we settled around the dining room table, myself near the foot with my fake girlfriend by my side.

“So, Stan,” Kyle said, chewing a bit of meatloaf. “Where do you see yourself and my daughter in ten years?”

“Daaaaad,” Ivy said with a sigh, hiding her face.

“I don’t know, but I’m looking forward to the journey.”

Dolores melted, looking at me like I was already one of her most favorite people in the universe. Iris rolled her eyes, but the other sisters seemed to kind of nod.

Kyle harrumphed, as if he'd hoped to catch me unawares, and I'd thwarted him.

I've heard a lot of shit talk about meatloaf but let me tell you that the stuff Ivy's mom made was good. Like, really, really good. I went back for seconds, and I'm normally not one for ground beef.

The asparagus had been expertly grilled, and I was surprised at the delicate, sweet texture of the carrot souffle for dessert. I got the impression they'd really laid out the good stuff in an effort to impress. I felt suitably honored.

After dinner, the family gathered in the living room for coffee. To my surprise, Kyle approached me, a silver cigar case in his hand.

"Don't suppose you're a cigar kind of guy, are you, Stan?"

"Is the pope Catholic?"

"Great. My wife can't stand the smell, so let's take a walk."

"Sure," I said, catching the glint in the old man's eye. I knew he had something more on his mind than just cigars.

He led me down the stairs. Kyle turned sideways, leaning his back against the wall to help descend. Once we hit the open air, he handed me a cigar and thrust the other in his mouth. They'd already been circumcised.

He lit his own with a wooden match, and then offered the same match to me. I leaned in and puffed it to life.

"Not bad," I said. "Austrian?"

“Vienna. I used to have a guy for Cubans, but he passed away.” He gave me a long, hard look. “So, Stan the Man Timmons. I did some research on you, once I found out you were dating my daughter.”

My heart sank. I hit the cigar to try and give myself a moment to think.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. You’re known for dating a different starlet or musician every week. You’ve never been pinned down with one woman for more than a month at best, and you were quoted in Forbes as saying that marriage is a great institution for those who wish to be institutionalized.”

“I see.” I waited expectantly for him to tell me to leave his daughter alone. However, that’s not what happened.

“Look,” he said with a deep sigh. “I always feared that my youngest daughter might not find a good man, because she’s, well—”

“Unique? Straightforward? Intelligent?”

“She’s belligerent and stubborn, and used to not have much good to say about men at all.” He pursed his lips and considered me for a long moment. “I love my daughter, and I concede that she’s lovely as can be, but why would a man who can literally have anyone be with her?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“I—I don’t know what to say.” I wasn’t sure if I should be insulted or not.

“I’m just asking you, son.” His eyes squeezed shut. “No, I’m begging you, don’t break her heart. After what happened with her college boyfriend—”

“What happened with her college boyfriend?” I asked, feeling a great swell of guilt and responsibility weighing on my shoulders. “I’d never heard of a college boyfriend.”

“They were getting serious, kind of like the two of you. Then he flew off to Europe for a semester and hooked up with some Swedish tramp. It broke her heart. I don’t want to see her hurt like that again.”

He put out his cigar, then turned and headed back inside. I followed him after a moment, not sure of what to do or say.

I’d never considered that someone might get hurt because of my scheme. I didn’t want that to happen, but what could I do?

What could I possibly do to avert a tragic outcome?

Chapter Nineteen

Ivy

After weeks of essentially method acting, I suppose it was understandable that the lines between reality and fantasy had begun to blur.

It was so far past the point of no return it wasn't even funny. I couldn't even consciously deny my feelings for Stan any longer. The only thing keeping me from just confessing everything to him in a rush was my uncertainty. I couldn't be sure he actually had real feelings for me.

I thought that he did. Every instinct in my body told me that he had real feelings even though it was a fake relationship. Yet, something held me back. I kept thinking the best thing to do would be to ride it out and just see where we stood after the fake relationship was over.

My way of dealing with it became not dealing with it. I discussed my 'boyfriend' with friends, my parents, my sisters, everyone. I began to forget during my day-to-day life we weren't really a couple. I sent and received flirtatious texts, spent the night at his place more often than my own, and spent a great deal of time with him both on the job and off.

I woke up one day in my own apartment and wondered why I wasn't at his. That was when I knew for certain I had a problem. It wasn't something I could ignore any longer.

I decided the best thing to do would be to come clean to my most sensible sister, Isabelle. She's also the only one I can count on to keep confidence. I haven't told anyone she slept with my other sister's husband before they were an item, so she owed me.

"Okay, back up," she said with a shocked scowl. "So this total hunk you've been bringing around, the one you're always hanging all over, and who's always hanging all over you, isn't really your boyfriend at all?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

“Bullshit.” Isabelle shook her head of curly dark hair. “No way are you guys faking it.”

I heaved a sigh.

“You see, that’s just it. You hit the nail right on the head. I’m not so sure that we’re faking it at all anymore. I think, at the least, I’m not faking it any longer.”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you. Either he’s the second coming of Sir Lawrence Olivier, or he’s really got it bad for you.”

“I’m not sure. He’s always been a huge player before, his license plates spell out ‘single for life,’ for crying out loud.”

“People can change.” Isabelle sipped her tea and leaned back in her chair. “Here’s the thing, though. Even if you don’t know how he’s going to react, you have to tell him how you feel.”

My heart skipped a beat. The idea was equal parts thrilling and terrifying.

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“You need to. If you don’t, this thing inside of you is just going to grow and fester until you do something colossally stupid.” Isabelle took my hand across the cafe table. “You know in your heart that I’m right. You need to tell Stan that your feelings are real.”

“What if he rejects me?”

“He might. But you’ll feel better in the long term regardless. You need to express these feelings and either explore or not explore them. But you need to express them

regardless.”

“All right,” I said. “You’ve convinced me. I’m seeing him after work tomorrow evening. I’ll tell him then.”

She squeezed my hand before releasing it.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Have courage, sis. You can do it.”

The next day, I rose early, feeling a weird energy surging through my body. It was a little bit like going to a new amusement park ride and being uncertain if it was going to be fun or terrorizing.

I dressed and headed into the office. I spent most of the morning handling calls and meetings with the Mastercraft acquisition team. The SEC had approved the sale, now we were just waiting for the final paperwork to come through on the government’s end.

I knew that Stan was looking to get the project through quickly, so I worked harder, trying to clear every remaining hurdle so he could get what he wanted.

Especially if what he wanted was me.

The skies clouded over and spat out thin rain over the city. Not enough to wash the streets clean, just enough to make it miserable. I sincerely hoped it wasn’t a portent of what was to come.

I heard the door to my office open. Stanley walked in, and instantly a smile blossomed on my face. I rose on instinct to go to him and put my arms around him.

I hugged him, and he went stiff. He tilted his head out of the way of my kiss and it landed on his fuzzy cheek instead of his lips. He hadn’t shaved that morning, and from the looks of the bags lurking under his eyes he hadn’t had much sleep, either.

“What’s wrong?” I took a step back and swept his bangs away from his forehead.

“Nothing,” he said, deflecting my wrist away. “Nobody’s watching, that’s all.”

I took a full step back and put my hands on my hips.

“Nobody was watching us the other night. Or the night before that, either.”

Stan closed his eyes, his jaw set hard. He sucked in a long breath through his mouth and let it out slowly through his nose.

“I think maybe sleeping together was a mistake.”

I felt as if he'd thrust a knife into my heart.

“A mistake?” I said in a small voice.

“Yes. It confused the issue.” He turned away from me and walked over to the window, staring out over the rain-swept cityscape. “This was never supposed to evolve into... whatever it has. We need to pull the trigger on the endgame before one of us gets hurt.”

I blinked away stinging tears.

Too late, I thought. Way too late. I was hurting badly, aching all the way to the very lining of my soul.

“If that’s what you want, Stan,” I said. I was proud of the fact my voice didn’t break. It felt as if I’d been punched in the gut with a fist made of ice. Stan was acting so cold, so distant. He wouldn’t even look at me.

“Look at me,” I said softly. “Look at me, Stan.”

He continued to stare out the window, his broad back facing me.

“Look at me,” I said more firmly.

He turned to me with great reluctance. I could see him waging war against himself. His gaze clouded over with the conflict, and his limbs trembled slightly.

“Now, tell me that you want to end... everything between us. Look me in the eye while you do it.”

His facade cracked. For a moment, his feelings bled through his gaze. Stan’s sensual mouth opened, and something akin to a strangled gasp came out.

Then he armored up. His eyes grew hard, and cold. His face twisted into a mask of anger.

“I. Want. It. Over!” He snapped.

I nodded, a tear streaming down my cheek.

“Okay,” I said, my voice sounding strangely calm and even in my ears. I was falling apart on the inside. How could I sound so calm? “I believe you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I swallowed the lump in my throat, but it came right back. Stanley nodded curtly and stormed to the doorway.

He stopped, hand grasping the door frame with white knuckle intensity. For a moment I thought he was going to turn around and tell me he'd changed his mind. That he did want me as much as I wanted him and it was all a terrible mistake.

But he didn't turn around. He just stood there, facing away from me.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry. This is my fault. It's all my—"

And he broke away out the door and vanished. I sat down in my chair, feeling as if I had a lead weight tied to my heart. It struggled to beat. It was as if the heartstrings were snapping one by one and it would just drop down into my feet somewhere.

I'm not sure how long I sat there. It must have been quite a while. The clouds broke and sunlight filtered in through the gray dreariness to spot the ground below with bright places.

None of those bright places seemed anything but very far away. I found it an excellent metaphor for what was going on inside of me.

My phone dinged. I saw I had a message from Stan and instantly my hopes soared. Had he texted me to make amends? To call off the entire fake breakup and declare that this relationship was now real?

I checked the message.

Sorry things got messy and complicated. I've transferred additional funds into your account to make up for the inconvenience.

Inconvenience. Inconvenience? The phone shook in my hand. Anger boiled up inside of me. Sorry things got messy and complicated. Was THAT what he was feeling? Messy and complicated? That's it, that's all?

Maybe I was feeling messy and complicated, too, but it wasn't all I was feeling. I grew increasingly upset as I read and re-read the message. Giving me extra money, like paying off a whore? And then calling the whole thing 'inconvenient.'

I hurled my phone across the room. Fortunately—or unfortunately as I'd been in a mood to break something—it hit the sofa cushion and slid down to stick up, half concealed in the upholstered fissure.

I held my head in my hands and sobbed out of anger and frustration as much as hurt. It really sucked that I couldn't really tell anyone, either. I couldn't seek solace from friends or family about a relationship that hadn't actually ended yet. Or fake ended. It was so tangled up in my mind that I couldn't stand it.

I began to wish I were one of the raindrops speeding toward the street below, where oblivion awaited. Let me just hit the sidewalk and melt away into the sewer...

I shook off that feeling. No, I was going to see it through to the bitter end. If he wanted an epic breakup, he was going to get one. I was going to pull no punches. I was going to lay it out for him exactly how much I'd been hurt, and how much contempt I had for him in not only letting it happen, but then referring to it after the fact as an inconvenience,

I'd show him some inconvenience. My tear-streaked face contorted into a sneer. I would show him exactly what he wanted.

I was going to give him the epic breakup he wanted, claws fully extended. It wasn't much to go on, anger and revenge, but it did keep me going through a very dark moment.

Now I was dying to pull the trigger. If I could only make him feel one ounce of the pain I did, it would have been worth it.

Chapter Twenty

Stan

I didn't sleep much the night after I told Ivy we were pulling the trigger on the whole fake relationship thing. It was time for the dramatic breakup, and then we would be free to go our separate ways. No more of all this fighting not to care. It would all be over.

I stood at the window looking out on the city below for hours. I kept trying to tell myself it was all for the best. After all, love never lasted. It was just a dopamine increase in the brain, nothing more and nothing less.

But I was having a very hard time convincing myself. All I wanted to do was call up Ivy and tell her how I really felt. Yet, I tried to convince myself that it wasn't real. I'd been fooled by the ruse just as much as my fellow partners.

Now it was time to make a painful, but necessary separation. I had to cut through it no matter how painful it might prove to be.

I'm not sure if I ever actually slept that night. I may have dozed on the sofa some, but for the most part I sulked all night. I only really fell into something akin to a deep slumber about ten minutes before I got a call that stirred me despite my lack of rest.

I opened my eyes, then immediately shut them against the brightness of the dawn. All the rain clouds were gone, and the sun shone, to my estimation, obnoxiously bright.

I grabbed the remote and changed the window tint to help block the horrid emanations and checked the phone screen.

The phone call came from my mother.

My mother only called on the holidays, unless she needed money. I never minded giving it to her, but she always acted like she put some terrible burden on me. On her salary, a new transmission would devastate her savings. For me, it represented an hour's interest on my weaker investments.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Hey Mom,” I said blearily into the phone. I stifled a yawn and tried to sound pleasant. “If you need funds, I’ll have to do it through Zelle because it’s a Sunday.”

“I don’t need any funds,” she said, a bit stiffly. “Can’t a mother just call her son?”

“Sure, a mother can call her son—it’s just that I’ve come to expect a certain protocol from you. If it’s not my birthday or a holiday, I assume it’s because you need help.”

“This time is different. I want to start being a bigger presence in your life, Stan.”

I frowned. “You do?”

“Yes. I really feel like I did you wrong. You looked so much like your father, and he broke my heart when he left us.”

I sighed.

“I’m sorry, too, Mom. I know I didn’t make it easy on you. I think I kind of blamed you for Dad leaving, even though he was the one who had an affair.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “That’s perfectly normal. Listen, can I take you to brunch? There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Um, sure,” I said, checking the time. “When and where?”

“I’m saying at the Sheraton, and they have the loveliest little bistro right off the lobby. We could meet there, say, around eleven o’clock?”

I checked the time. Half-past seven. Jesus Christ, she called me at seven on a Sunday? I ran a hand over my stubble.

“Could we make it eleven-thirty?”

“Yes, that would be fine. I love you, son.”

I was a bit taken aback. We weren’t the kind of family who said that much when I was growing up, even before my dad left.

“I love you, too, Mom.”

I wondered if it were some kind of portent, my mother suddenly coming back to town. And stranger still, she didn’t want money. I wondered what could be so important.

A cold, awful thought gripped me as I stood in front of the mirror, my face covered in shaving cream. What if she’d gotten some bad news at the doctor? And she was circling the drain? That might explain why all of the sudden she’d made contact.

I almost threw up in the shower, I worried myself so much. By the time I made it down to the lobby of my building, I had sunk into something approaching despair. I guess my lack of sleep and all the turmoil with Ivy and our fake relationship ending had me a little screwed up. It made me terrified.

I arrived at the bistro and spotted my mother sitting near the far side at a comfortable-looking booth. I had to admit, it was a nice little bistro, with darkly stained wooden floors and rustic decor, complete with a lighting fixture consisting of old wagon wheels and industrial light bulbs.

“Mom,” I said, as she rose to her feet. She stood a foot shorter than I, her blonde hair

belying the gray she dyed out of it. She was looking good, healthy and happy. I hoped that meant she wasn't as sick as I'd feared.

She rose from the booth, and I hugged her tight.

"Stan," she said with a sigh, hugging me back. "I've missed you."

"I missed you, too, Mom." I sat down at the booth. "How are you feeling? Anything, you know, troublesome about your recent checkups?"

"I'm fine, honey," she said, putting her hand on top of my own. "I might be getting cataracts in my left eye, but my vitals are good. Ironically my blood pressure has never been this good."

"That's excellent news." I relaxed. "When I heard that you wanted to talk to me, I was afraid it would be something bad."

"It's not something bad, but, well, I'm not sure how you're going to react, Stan."

My eyes narrowed.

"What's going on?"

She dropped her gaze, and then sighed.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“About six months ago, I was at a charity function in LA when I ran into the most fascinating man—”

“Oh jeez, mom, not again,” I said with a groan. “When are you going to learn?”

She closed her mouth.

“When am I going to learn what?”

“When are you going to learn about these guys you keep hooking up with?” I threw my hands in the air. “Come on. How many potential stepdads did you go through when I was a kid? Dozens? And none of them lasted more than a week or two.”

She sighed, and bobbed her head in admission of her guilt.

“It’s true. I was desperate to find that glow I had with your father in the early days. I kept looking for it in all the wrong places.” She lifted her gaze at last and smiled. “But this time it’s different. This time I really do think so.”

“Come on, Mom, you were the one who taught me that love isn’t real, that it’s just temporary insanity.”

Her face fell.

“If that’s what I taught you, then I’m really, really sorry—”

Her face suddenly lit up like it was Christmas morning. My mother rose from her seat

and enthusiastically waved at someone who'd entered the bistro. My gaze was drawn to a dark-skinned man in a nicely tailored leisure suit with salt and pepper hair and beard to match. He was a handsome man in spite of his age, with piercing blue eyes and a warm, easy smile.

And both his gaze and smile were focused squarely on my mother. I felt a stab of anger, territorial and primal, but it faded as the man drew closer. I didn't think he was faking his affection for her. My next thought was he was trying to get at my money through my mother, but then I noticed his Rolex, his brand new TurboDroid XXL phone, and platinum neck chain and realized this guy had plenty of his own money.

She embraced him, and he kissed her on the cheek. They settled in on the opposite side of the booth, and he immediately took her hand.

"Stan, this is Ernesto. Ernesto, this is my son, Stan."

"Nice to meet you, Stan," he said in slightly accented English. I shook his hand, and he had a good grip. He didn't try to break my hand or any of that bullshit, but it was a powerful grip all the same.

"Is this why you wanted me to meet you?" I asked.

"Yes, I did want the two of you to meet, but, it's more than that." My mom held her hand out for my perusal. For the first time since I'd walked into the bistro, I noticed that she wore a new bit of jewelry. My eyes widened as the implications settled in.

"You—you're getting married?" I blurted.

"Yes," she said, smiling huge and leaning into Ernesto. "You see, honey, that's why I'm so worried that you think I taught you love isn't real. I've found it at last, with Ernesto."

“You didn’t love dad?”

“I did at first, I really did. Sometimes people grow apart, and sometimes, they grow together.” She looked into Ernesto’s eyes and sighed. “Over the last six months, Ernie and I have grown closer together. Neither of us is getting any younger, and we figured, why wait? Why not give in to love?”

Ernie fixed me with a sober frown.

“Stan, I know this must come as a shock. I know you’re probably thinking that you want to protect your mother from some lothario, and it’s easy to see why. But I do love your mother, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her.”

I took a deep breath, and looked at them both. So happy. So fucking happy. I envied them, even as I felt happy for them.

“If you can make my mother happy, then you’re going to be one of my favorite people in the entire world, Ernesto,” I said, taking the high road. “Nothing would please me more than to be part of your wedding.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear.” Mom reached out and took my hand across the table. “I was hoping that since grandpa has passed, maybe you could give me away?”

“Yeah,” I blurted. “You bet. Anything for you, Mom.”

Ernesto’s phone rang, and he winced.

“I’m so sorry, but I have to take this. It’s that thing I talked about before—”

“I understand,” she said.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

Ernesto got on the phone, speaking Spanish to another man. I don't know what they talked about, but I heard the words NYSE and Puerto Rico several times. I took the opportunity to speak with my mother about what was really bothering me.

“Mom, how do you know if it's really love, or you just want it to be?”

“I wish I could answer that,” she said, smiling sadly. “You just have to figure it out for yourself.”

I picked up the tab, over Ernesto's protestations, and we all agreed to meet later in the week for cocktails. I headed back home, no longer feeling so tired. I was too confused and wound up to be tired.

I was starting to wonder if I should give the feelings I had for Ivy a chance. But with the hammer about to fall on our fake relationship—

Was it too little, too late?

Chapter Twenty-One

Ivy

The day of the big breakup arrived. I spent the entire night before awake, looking through all of the photos Stan and I had taken.

It was hard to look at them and see anything but lies. I tried to pinpoint the exact moment I started to get the feels. I couldn't do it. It seemed almost as if I'd gone into

the arrangement already feeling too much.

The entire thing had me discombobulated in the extreme. It wasn't just a matter of what I felt, but what I should have been feeling, even what I had a right to feel.

Hurt permeated every thought, exuded from every pore. I knew that's what I felt. But part of me believed I shouldn't. I'd gone into the fake relationship thing with my eyes wide open. I should have been relieved the whole mess was about to be over.

Then, I wondered if I even had a right to feel so hurt. Had Stan ever led me on? Not with words, no. He never explicitly stated he wanted us to be anything than pretend boyfriend and girlfriend,

His actions, however, told a different story. There were so many times when we were alone, snuggling on the sofa, or thrashing together in bed, and it seemed so perfect. Too perfect to just be-pretend.

I didn't know if what I observed was real, or just a product of my own mind, however. Without solid evidence, all I could do was suffer in a prison of my own making.

Everything seemed to unfold in slow motion as I finally gave up on sleep and dressed for the day. I went into the shower, joylessly washing my body and conditioning my hair. The sun remained hidden behind a blurry fog of rain clouds, perfectly suiting my mood.

I brushed out my hair, trying not to focus on how miserable I appeared. Cosmetics helped hide both my lack of sleep and mental anguish. I intended to look absolutely my best. I chose a thin silhouette dress paired with a blazer and hose. Take off the blazer, and I was ready for the rooftop gala planned for later.

Sheer determination not to think about anything else than work kept me from dwelling on my misery. I finished up my work all too quickly, leaned back in my chair, and dropped off into a restless, haunted sleep.

I dreamt something, but I couldn't remember what. All I knew was that it had been harrowing. I straightened up, got a fresh cup of coffee, and proceeded with the afternoon workload.

I didn't feel like eating. Everything seemed so tranquil, and yet it was as if an explosion were going off in slow motion. Though the flames hadn't reached me yet, I knew that they would eventually. Inevitably.

When the sun dipped low toward the horizon, I knew it was nearly time. I forced myself to eat a croissant with chicken salad spread over it. I didn't want to faint from hunger and exhaustion before my big moment. The performance of a lifetime.

Stan had it all planned out. Toward the middle of the evening, there would be a series of ceremonial champagne toasts, to celebrate an excellent end to the fiscal year. When it came to his turn to toast, he would say something mean and/or crass in a toast to me. Then I would snap at him, perhaps even using my own toast to make our breakup official.

I made my way to the party by myself. That was another aspect of Stan's oh so ingenious plan. He thought it would make it look like we were having problems before the big, dramatic breakup.

The party took place at a building a few blocks away. I chose to walk. I showed my invitation to the doorman and was directed to an express elevator up to the top floor.

When the doors slid open, I looked out over the party guests and sighed. At least, after that night, I would no longer have to lie about the fake relationship. Plus, I had

real-world pain, so I supposed I was doing my penitence.

I saw Stan talking to Jonathon near an ice sculpture of a goat. He cut a handsome figure in his tuxedo, though it looked to me like he might have missed a bit of sleep as well.

He smiled at my approach, though his eyes remained cold.

“My dear, you look lovely tonight,” he said.

I moved in and we did a stiff, formal hug. Jonathon eyed us both closely, a concerned frown on his face. Well, he was picking up on the awkward iciness. I thought bitterly that it would make our performance that much better.

“Thank you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

There was a dark energy about us that night. The other people and couples especially could feel it. The air felt highly charged, like right before a thunderstorm. We moved through the gala making small talk to various guests, and never really going into any depth when asked how our relationship was going.

The skies intermittently threatened rain, but gradually cleared until a sliver of moon shone through the thin clouds. The time for the champagne toasts drew near, and my belly jumped and roiled with anxiety.

I just wanted to get it over with. I wondered what thing he was going to say to me. I feared it. Like knowing your boyfriend is going to abuse you verbally before it happens. Only he wasn't my boyfriend. Not really. It had all just been pretend, and I was just a pretender, too. In other words, a liar.

Only I wasn't pretending to feel. I kept staring at Stan out of the corner of my eye, hoping to see some sign, any sign, that he cared about me even a little. His defenses remained up the entire time. His eyes were cold and hard and inscrutable, he was an unassailable mountain beyond any human concerns.

Jonathon went first for the toast. He toasted to his wife, who in turn toasted to the hard-working employees of the firm.

As the time drew near for our turn, I almost couldn't stand myself. It felt like I had a swarm of angry bees in my belly, and fire ants running around beneath my skin. I fidgeted and gripped the champagne glass in my hand so tightly I'm surprised the stem didn't break.

“All right, everyone,” Stan bellowed. I think he was pretending to be somewhat inebriated, though he’s barely touched a drop of alcohol all night. “I just want to make a special toast to my special lady, Ivy.”

Applause rippled up and I smiled nervously. I feared what was coming next.

“I just wanted to say, I forgive you for sitting on my Xbox controller and breaking it, even though it was completely your fault.”

My eyes bulged out of my head. I’d barely remembered sitting on his controller and had only done so because he started tickling me and I sort of fell onto it. He’d said it was no big deal at the time.

Nervous laughter rose up from the gathered throng. I took the microphone from his hand and smiled, though my eyes were fierce and cold as ice daggers.

“Thanks for that, Stan,” I said. I breathed into the mike and sighed. “Stan, Stan, Stan... Stan the Man. Can we get a little hand for Stan the Man folks? C’mon.”

People applauded, perhaps eager to get past the awkward moment where he’d insulted me for his toast. I nodded.

“Yeah, keep it going. I mean, Stan is a legend in this firm, right? Yeah, a legend for being a prick.”

Laughter rose up, but it faded quite quickly when people saw I wasn’t smiling.

“Yeah, Stan’s a cold bastard. You might think that he actually cared about me, the way we looked in public, but it wasn’t real.” I glared at him as he swallowed nervously. I was skirting the edge of revealing his secret, spilling my guts to the world. I held myself in check, barely.

“You don’t actually care about me at all,” I said as a hushed silence fell over the party. “Not one bit. You were just using me, and now that you’re done with me you’re going to just, what, act like a total ass so I leave you first? Well, you know what?”

I laughed. Jonathon covered his mouth with his hand. Megan and Mason held each other’s hands and looked as if they wanted it all to end. And Chandler shook his head sadly.

“It’s going to work.” I glared at him. “I am going to leave you before you leave me. You don’t deserve me. You deserve exactly what you have right now at this moment. Nothing.”

“Um, haha,” he said, grabbing for the microphone. “Okay, that’s enough.”

I pulled it away from him.

“Oh no, I don’t think it’s enough at all.” I shook my head. “You’re a selfish prick who uses people, and you could have had something real. Instead, you squandered it so you could look cool in front of your friends, I guess.”

I looked around, and I realized that I was ruining everyone’s night. Suddenly I didn’t want to be there. I wanted to be anywhere but there.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice breaking. “I’m very sorry.”

I shoved the microphone into Stan’s hand and turned to leave. When I got to the elevator, I headed inside and jammed my finger on the ground floor button. Just as the doors were about to shut, a hand thrust its way in between them.

I waited, hoping, fearing it would be Stan. Chandler appeared instead.

“Hey.” He stood in the elevator with me as the doors shut. “I’m really sorry things didn’t work out with you and Stan.”

“Thanks.” I sniffled, and he handed me a handkerchief. I blew my nose wetly.

“Listen,” he said. “I’m sorry about you and Stan, but I do want to say also you’ve done an excellent job as a project manager.”

“Thank you.” I smiled though the accolade didn't hit like it should have. I was hurting too much to realize how momentous it really was for my career.

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“In fact, I think I’d like to make the position permanent. The caveat is you’d have to move to Singapore. I wasn’t going to offer it to you, because you and Stan seemed to be getting serious...”

“I’ll take it,” I said, blowing my nose again. “I appreciate the opportunity.”

“You’ve earned it.”

I tried to hand him back his handkerchief. He waved me off and exited the elevator. I tucked it into my palm, knowing that before the night was over, I would be needing it again.

Lots more.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Stan

I paced back and forth in my living area, phone to my ear as I left another voicemail for Ivy. Sweat coated my body and rolled into my eyes, making them sting and tear.

“Hey, I got cut off before I had a chance to get to my point. My point is—bravo. Fucking bravo. You played your role to perfection. Perfection. You humiliated me in front of my friends, my peers—great fucking job. I should give you a bonus.”

The phone almost slipped out of my sweat slickened palm. I fumbled it, ending the voice mail.

“Fuck!” I almost sent the phone flying across the room. Only the thought that Ivy might possibly call me back kept me from doing so.

I called again, and once again it went straight to voicemail. Her phone must have been off.

“Might I remind you, this was a fake relationship.” I ran my free hand through my damp hair. “So how come you’re for real pissed off at me? I mean, fuck, this is what we agreed upon. You can’t be mad at me for this. It’s just not fair.”

I realized what I sounded like. It’s not fair. How old was I, twelve?

I heaved a huge sigh, the anger abruptly draining out of me.

“Ivy,” I said, the ache and yearning in my tone evident even to my own ears. “Ivy, Ivy, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t want you to get hurt. The truth is, I’m hurting too. I know it was fake, but at some point it—”

The voice mail cut me off.

“Fuck me!” I dropped the phone on the carpet with a heavy thunk and went to the window. I smacked my forehead against the window and groaned, but not from physical pain.

“I fucked it all up. How did I fuck this all up? Brilliant plan, Stan. Fucking brilliant. Start a fake relationship to prove to your friends there’s no such thing as love, and then you... what? Fall in love?”

I looked up at the ceiling and laughed.

“How am I even supposed to know if I’m in love or not? My mom and Ernesto

looked happy, but then again, so did my mom and dad. How do I know it's not all going to fall apart? It's the law of thermodynamics. Things fall apart. Chinua Achebe was so, so right."

I ran a hand down my face. I decided that maybe I could try another tactic. I remembered that Chandler was a mentor of sorts to Ivy. Maybe he knew where she had gone.

He answered my call on the third ring.

"Stan, it's two o'clock in the morning and I have a very pregnant wife."

"Is it that late?" I shook my head. "Shit. Listen, Chandler, I'm sorry to call so late, but I can't seem to get a hold of Ivy. Do you know where she is?"

"I think maybe I should let her explain that."

I sighed and pressed my head against the glass again.

"Chandler, I've been trying to get a hold of her and she won't answer her phone, and she's not home. I checked."

"Maybe you should have tried to call her right away instead of waiting twenty-four hours."

"I was giving her a chance to cool off."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Yeah, like that ever works.” I heard him drinking from the tap and then his voice returned. “You screwed the pooch this time, Stan. I don’t know if you can fix this.”

“Oh come on, there’s always a way.”

“With business, maybe. But not with heartbreak. Look, I shouldn’t be telling you this, but after your dramatic breakup, I offered her a full-time project manager position at the Singapore branch.”

“You what?” I sputtered. “You son of a bitch.”

“Hey, don’t blame me. I was waffling about whether or not to offer it to her or not, because quite frankly you two seemed really happy together.”

I broke down a little, sliding to my knees and slumping against the window ledge.

“I think we were happy, man. It wasn’t the way it was supposed to go. It wasn’t the plan.”

“Oh, you wanted to bang her for a while and then dump her, huh? Well, she dumped you instead, and damn, did you ever have that coming. It was like she spoke with the voice of every chick you swept off their feet and then abandoned.”

“You make me sound like a piece of shit.”

“Hey, you insisted on being Stan the Man. The eternal frat boy. The bachelor holdout. You’ve spent years trying to convince everyone you’re that guy. So why are you mad

now that we all think you're what you've been telling us you were all along?"

"I—come on, man." I was on the edge of tears. Not because I thought he was being unfair. No, because he was goddamn right. He was goddamn right.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was a bit harsh. All I'm saying is, you don't have to be that guy if you don't want to. You can be the guy who gets the girl and keeps her. Next time."

"Next time?" I sputtered.

"Yeah, like I said, I think it's too late. Plus, honestly, I have to say that I think she'd make an excellent project manager and it would be kind of a waste if you guys hooked up."

"When is she scheduled to leave?"

"This morning at nine."

I rubbed my eyes and laughed bitterly.

"Thanks, Candy."

"You know I hate it when—"

I ended the call, and then stood up. It was too late. I'd lost her for good. Now what was I going to do?

Punish myself? Don't mind if I do. It sounded like a good idea.

I threw on a coat and took a cab down to one of the twenty-four-hour-a-day bars in

Jersey. There's a curious mix of folks in that time of night, when most bars have long since closed down. You have a smattering of college-aged party kids who just didn't want to go back home or to the dorm room. You also had the real, dedicated drunks, who mostly kept to themselves or sat in small groups who burst into occasional peals of laughter.

Then, you had the one percenter motorcycle clubs, who believe it or not generally didn't start any shit. They were there to drink and relax after a long ride and didn't want trouble.

I did. I sure as fuck did.

I went to the bar to get myself a bowl of loudmouth soup. I knocked down a couple of brews—served in a can, because they don't have glass in an establishment like that one—and looked around for my target.

I saw him in the corner, dealing stud. Six and a half feet tall, big beer belly but arms like the chains they use to pull anchors. Lots of tattoos, and an attitude that suggested the cards weren't going his way. Perfect.

I sat my can of beer down, belched, and sidled off my stool. I loosened my tie and took it off, tucking it into my pocket. I took about three steps toward him when someone slammed into me, hard.

“Hey, what the fuck?” said a high-pitched, yet gravelly voice.

I looked into the eyes of a leather-clad biker, shaggy beard and bandana hiding much of his face. I'd run right into him.

He wasn't nearly as big as the other guy, but I figured he would do.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“What do you mean, what the fuck, Duck Dynasty?” I sneered. “Which one of those tricycles is yours out there? I really need to take a piss and I think I’ll do it on your seat. Also, your mom gives the best blow jobs in all of the Eastern Seaboard.”

The whole place went silent. The college kids threw money on the table and scampered away. The bartender—I shit you not—put a mouthpiece in and then secured a football helmet to his head.

The entire bar had an Old West kind of feel. You know, when two gunslingers face off in the middle of the street? That’s where I thought we were headed.

Then the biker scoffed. He turned to look at some of the other bikers in the corner.

“Do you believe this guy?” he said. “I mean, seriously.”

“Don’t you want to kick my ass?” I asked.

“Well, it’s obvious that you’re looking to get your ass beat. That automatically makes me not want to do it.” He shrugged. “So what’s going on, buddy? Why is a guy in a thousand-dollar suit and five hundred dollars shoes doing in a dive like this, trying to pick fights with strangers?”

My shoulders slumped.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m pretty pathetic. I was looking to punish myself for throwing away the best thing that ever happened to me and then shitting all over it.”

“Sounds like you fucked up big time. Here, let me buy you an overpriced can of piss warm beer and you can tell me all about it.”

I laughed. “It is pretty warm.”

We sat down at the bar and I went into my spiel.

“So, I hooked up with the woman at a party. And it was hot, like super, super hot, but it was obvious we were both just looking for a one-night stand type of deal. I didn't get her number, or even her last name.”

“You romantic, you,” he said between sips of sour beer.

“I know, right? It's funny you say that. Because when I bumped into her the next day, I thought she would be the perfect accomplice to have a fake relationship with.”

“Why in the fuck would you want a fake relationship? Are you trying to stay in the country or something?”

“No, it's not that. I wanted to show all my married friends that love is a lie, and nothing lasts forever. Instead, I fell in love with her. I fell in love with Ivy.”

I marveled at the words coming out of my mouth for their veracity. It was true. I was in love with Ivy.

“I love her, and I lost her.” I rested my head on the bar. “Fuck.”

“Hey, have you tried calling her?”

“I've called a lot, to the point where she blocked my number, I think.”

“Well, here,” he said, digging into his jacket pocket. “Why don’t you use my phone, then? She won’t recognize the number and given that she’s about to go on a trip she’ll probably answer just to see who it is.”

“I don’t know, man.” I sighed. “Can the leopard really change its spots? I’ve been chasing tail for so long, living from one pair of ripped panties to the next, that I’m not sure I can really settle down with anyone.”

“If that’s true, why were you trying to pick a fight in a dive bar at four o’clock in the goddamn morning?”

I had no good answer for that, and the biker sighed.

“Look my man... close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Just go for it.”

“Okay, sure, why not. Here, my eyes are closed.”

“All right, picture this—it’s ten years in the future, and you’re married to this woman you love, and you have kids and all of that shit. Can you picture it?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“I can,” I said, surprised at how easy it was. I saw Ivy, her hair a bit longer, sitting in a big backyard while a pair of young children raced around the yard. One of them stopped and rushed over to hug my legs.

“How do you feel?”

“Good,” I said.

“Then I think maybe you should be asking yourself, not can you change—but have you changed already?”

He offered the phone and a smile. I took it and dialed her number.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ivy

I felt like shit the morning after my breakup with Stan. I kept checking my phone to see if he would text, or call, or something. Maybe show some sign that maybe he wasn't a completely heartless bastard who had used me in exactly the way he told me he would.

Then, almost twenty-four hours on the dot after I'd left him eviscerated on that rooftop, he called me. At that point, I was so angry, I didn't answer. He left a voicemail, and after a moment's consideration, I listened to it.

“Hey, what in the actual fuck?” He sputtered. “I mean, what was all of that? We

never talked about all of that. I said dramatic, not fucking brutal. God damn, did you have—did you have to say all that shit?”

It sounded like he dropped his phone. A thunk and lots of cursing followed. Then the voicemail ended.

I slammed my phone down on the sofa beside me and fumed. What in the actual fuck? That’s how he decided to talk to me? Here I thought maybe he wanted to make up, or at least to recover from the absolute cluster fuck that our dramatic break up had been.

No, instead, he wants to berate me because I damaged his ego. The next message wasn’t any better.

“Hey, I got cut off before I had a chance to get to my point.”

He had a point? Other than being a prick?

“My point is—bravo. Fucking bravo. You played your role to perfection. Perfection.”

“Because you wanted me to, you prick. You can’t be mad because I did what you told me to do!”

Of course, he couldn’t actually hear me as it was a recording, and he started talking over me.

“You humiliated me in front of my friends, my peers—great fucking job. I should give you a bonus.”

I ended the voice mail. I was very angry. For some reason, I decided to listen to the next one, and it got even worse.

“Might I remind you, this was a fake relationship.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped, though I knew he couldn’t hear me.

“So how come you’re for real pissed off at me? I mean, fuck, this is what we agreed upon. You can’t be mad at me for this. It’s just not fair—”

I turned off the voice mail. I then blocked his number and deleted all of his prior messages. God, what an asshole. Instead of calling to make up with me, maybe tell me that he feels the same way for me that I do for him, he insults me and treats me like shit.

I might as well have been a whore to him. I was too mad to sleep, though I had an early flight. I wound up spending most of the night sitting there on the sofa fuming mad. I went through a lot of different cycles of thoughts.

At first, I tried to psych myself up about the new job. Fuck Stan. He didn’t matter anymore. I was going to a new office, in a new country, where I would be more than just an interim project manager. It was the real deal, and I was going to use it as a springboard to greater things.

My bravado crumbled in the grim reality that no matter how big a jerk he’d been acting of late, I still had feelings for Stan. Maybe even loved him. That made me break down in an ugly crying fit, with lots of snorting and sobbing and snot.

After my crying fit, I went into the shower and just sort of felt numb. I didn’t really think of much of anything other than the practicalities of getting my body clean and catching my flight on time.

I knew it was a long, long flight to Singapore. I didn’t want to wear a really nice suit on such a long flight, so I dressed business casual. I would have time to go to the

hotel and change before coming to my new office.

I tried not to look at myself in the mirror too much. My lack of sleep and crying had left my face swollen, and I didn't feel like a million bucks, or even fifty cents at that point.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

My misery had settled over my shoulders like an intangible pall. I didn't even try to shirk it. I just let it weigh me down. I was going to call a cab when Chandler sent me a text saying he was sending a car to take me to the airport.

I texted him a thank you and sat on the stairs outside my apartment building waiting for the car, my luggage beside me. I was only going to Singapore for a week the first time. Then I would return home and settle up my lease, get my stuff packed up for shipment to my new place in Singapore, and spend some time with family and friends.

One person I wouldn't see, no matter what, during that leg of my journey would be Stan. I decided I was done with him, for good.

The limo showed up when the sky was just beginning to brighten with the first vestiges of dawn. The driver smiled at me politely and took my luggage and put it in the trunk. I only took my purse into the back.

I wished that Chandler hadn't sent the limo. I knew he meant well, to send me to my new job in style, but it reminded me of all the time I'd spent with Stan.

I didn't want to be reminded of Stan, not one bit.

When we were about twenty minutes out from the airport, my phone rang. Unknown number. Probably spam. I just canceled it.

The same number came up a moment later. I wondered if maybe it was someone at the Singapore office trying to reach me.

“Hello?” I said.

“Ivy.”

My heart skipped a beat. It was Stan. He sounded rough, and maybe more than a little drunk. He must have called from someone else’s phone. From the sound of it he was at a bar, and a fairly rowdy one at that.

The last thing in the world I wanted to do was hear his voice in the first place. I most especially did not want to hear him go on another angry tirade. The fact he was a bit drunk would make it even worse. He would have no inhibitions and would lay my soul bare to his lacerating tongue.

“Fuck you, Stan,” I sputtered. “Just—just fuck you. How dare you call me?”

“Ivy, I just wanted to talk—”

“Oh, now you want to talk? After you left those, those horrid messages on my phone? How do you—your first words to me were ‘what in the actual fuck.’ How do you say that to me? How? Do I mean so little to you?”

“Ivy, please, I—”

“No, you don’t get to talk goddamn it. You don’t get to talk.” I hissed through clenched teeth now, my vitriol only growing stronger. “You just sit there on your drunk, arrogant ass and you listen. You listen to me for a change.”

I took a deep breath, and gave voice to my pain and fury.

“Did you listen to ALL of my messages—”

“I told you to shut up! I heard enough, you bastard. I heard enough. I know you don’t want to admit it, but you and I had something real. It was real goddamn it.”

“Ivy...”

“Don’t say my name. Don’t you dare say my name, you keep my name out of your goddamn mouth.” I spat into the phone like a venomous cobra. The driver raised the privacy screen on his own accord. “We had something, and you decided to squander it. Why? So you could prove a point to your friends? So you could make them think their own love wasn’t real?”

I shook my head as tears streamed down my cheeks.

“I mean, that’s just awful, Stan. That’s not a thing a friend would do.”

“I thought I was helping them—”

“Stan, let’s just end that bullshit right now.” I was still angry, but I was better able to control my tone, and the words that came out of my mouth were no less incisive for their lack of volume. “You didn’t want to help your friends. You wanted to help yourself. You wanted to ‘prove’ to them love wasn’t real so you wouldn’t have to feel like it was your fault for being miserable and alone.”

I waited for him to deny it. To my surprise, he didn’t.

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right. That was my motivation all along. I’m an asshole, all right?”

“At least you can admit it, I suppose.” I sighed. “Stan, I think that there’s a decent person inside of you somewhere, but you’re determined to never let him out. You let me see him a few times, but you mostly keep him bottled up. Someday, you might

find a woman willing to put up with the long, long uphill battle it's going to take to make you let that person out. It's just not going to be me."

I ended the call and turned my phone off. Then I held my face in my hands and had another crying fit. Thank goodness I hadn't put on makeup. I'd look like something out of a horror movie if I had.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I had no idea what he really wanted to say to me. I did know that whatever it was, it wouldn't have been what I wanted to hear. Stan wasn't going to suddenly admit to having feelings for me.

And quite frankly, I had no evidence he even cared for me at all. It was all a pretend relationship, and maybe some of the time he forgot he was pretending. Some, but never completely.

I'd been the fool in the situation. Stan had laid out the deal, and I'd taken it willingly. I even tried to guard my heart, but that hadn't worked.

I had no one to blame but myself for my heartache. But I was still mad at Stan. I wasn't mad at him for hurting me so much as I was mad he wouldn't admit there was something there. That's why I'd insisted on telling him it was real.

It was real. It was real to me, even if it wasn't real to him. I had no way of knowing if he'd ever actually cared for me or not, but I couldn't just pretend like I didn't love him.

Even if it killed me on the inside to admit it.

Admitting it was the first step to moving on. I didn't want to, though. I didn't want to move on. What I wanted was impossible. I wanted Stan to be someone better than he was. I wanted him to be the man I'd seen trapped in chrysalis.

Instead, he'd chosen to burrow deeper into his cocoon and refused to change.

I wept bitter tears as I finally accepted that it was all over.

Eventually, I hoped I would stop loving him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Stan

I stared at the phone in my hand, feeling like I just couldn't do a goddamn thing right. Wasn't I competent at one point in my life? How could I be fucking up so much and so often?

"Here," I said glumly, handing the phone back to the bearded biker. "Thanks anyway."

"What happened?"

"She didn't have time to listen to my bullshit." I sighed. "Once again, I had a chance to try and fix things and instead I made them worse."

"How did you make it worse?"

"I got defensive instead of listening to what she was saying. Goddamn it, the first words out of my mouth should have been 'I love you.' Now I've missed my last chance."

"I have to ask, buddy," the gravel-voiced biker said, meeting my gaze with lovely brown eyes. Odd that I found them appealing. "Why didn't you make those the first words to come out of your mouth?"

"Well, I'm not sure. It was hard to make them come out of my mouth."

“There are only two reasons that could be true.” His brow furrowed and he fixed me with a stern gaze. “Either you couldn't say them because you knew deep down you didn't mean them... or you mean them so much it makes them hard to get out of your mouth. So which is it?”

“It's the second,” I said without hesitation. “I mean I've never been in love before but I'm not sure what else this could be.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Like a motherfucker.”

“Then it's love. If it doesn't hurt, it's probably not real love.” He slapped a heavy hand on my shoulder. “So what's your next move?”

“My next move?” I laughed helplessly. “I don't have a next move. It's over. I've fired all my shots, and hell, I've even managed to sneak in a few extras, and I've blown them all. At some point you've just got to accept defeat.”

“I'm surprised to hear you sounding so pessimistic. Aren't you the guy who negotiated the Voorhees merger?”

I blinked in confusion.

“You're right, but how did you know about that? And what does it even matter now?”

“That deal is legendary. It even trickles down to my lowly ears.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I cocked my head to the side. Something was off with this biker and I couldn't put my finger on it.

“And as far as how it applies in this case, well, you ran down to the wire on that deal, and you didn't give up.”

“Are you trying to say I shouldn't give up on Ivy?” I scoffed. “Give me a break. How am I supposed to convince her of anything if she won't even listen to me?”

“I'm not sure how to work that out. But let's just assume, hypothetically for a moment, that someone was able to get you to an in-person meeting with Ivy.”

“How?”

“Never mind that now.”

“No, seriously, how? She might even have boarded her flight by this point. It's too late.”

“Just humor me for a moment. Do you know what you would say?”

I thought about it, and nodded sadly.

“Yes, I do. I know exactly what I would say. Too bad it's much too late.”

The biker finished his beer and slammed the can on the bar. Then he stood up and bellowed at the top of his gravelly lungs.

“Hey, you bunch of sons of bitches!”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to call them that?” I asked.

He glared down at me.

“Check out the back of my jacket, skeezer.”

I did. There, on a logo featuring a wolf with an American flag in its mouth, were the words Bunch of Sons of Bitches, NY chapter.

“Our friend Stan here has got a problem. He needs to get to the airport like right fucking now if he’s going to keep the love of his life.”

“Now wait just a minute here,” one of the old salts said. “You want us to give a Laredo escort to some buffer boy?”

“Yeah,” said the giant man from before. “How do we even know he’s in love?”

The bar fell silent. Suddenly I was the subject of dozens of gazes, many of them borderline hostile. I wasn’t sure what to say. I swallowed hard, and cleared my throat.

“Well,” I said. “Because... it hurts?”

The big man sniffed.

“That’s so true. Love is painful.”

“Here here,” said one of the other bikers, and slammed back his can. “I say we give buffer boy the Laredo escort—but he has to undergo initiation.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” I said.

Five minutes later, I stood outside the bar with a chain padlocked around my waist and my feet duct-taped to a skateboard.

“And everyone had to go through this insane initiation?” I snapped.

“I don't know,” the biker said. “I think they’re just making up shit as they go along, honestly.”

“What?”

“GO!” shouted my biker friend.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

The chain grew taut as a man on a huge, noisy Harley tore down the road. I was yanked along, barely able to keep my footing on the skateboard. He careened around the corner, and the chain swung me out wide.

“No, no no,” I gasped right before I slammed bodily into a bunch of overflowing garbage cans. Tin rained down on the street behind me as fetid filth exploded all over me. I pulled a banana peel off my eyes just in time to see that he was turning another corner.

I began reeling myself up the slack in the chain, so I wouldn’t get whipped out as far. I managed to avoid a collision with a telephone pole for this reason. A pigeon didn’t quite get out of the way in time and got caught in the duct tape holding my feet to the skateboard.

“Fuck me,” I screamed as we came around the block. I saw the dive bar coming up on my right side. I hoped that meant this joyride was almost over.

The biker slammed on his brakes, and I careened right into the back of the bike. I hit hard and doubled over, clutching my balls.

“Woo hoo!” One of the bikers came over and dragged me to my feet. They poured something over my head. I thought it was a beer until I realized it was syrupy. They were pouring motor oil over my head.

Well, there went my suit, but at least I got the Laredo escort. I was soon ensconced in my biker friend’s sidecar, along with a pit bull named Peaches, and the rest of the biker gang coordinated efforts to keep the streets clear for us.

A lot of the time this involved very illegal things like using their bikes to stop cross traffic so we could fly through red lights. It wasn't long before we had sirens pursuing us, not to mention other people who had decided to join in on the escort just because it looked like fun.

The whole screaming mess of us turned the final corner before the airport. My biker friend grinned fiercely behind his beard.

“Hang on tight, it's about to get real fucking crazy here.”

“Oh shit.”

He opened up the throttle, and we shot forward like a rocket. I felt the wind increase tenfold until it felt like a physical hand trying to push me out of the sidecar. I grabbed the handlebars and felt myself sliding out to the edge.

The biker let out a full-on, lusty laugh, which I could barely hear above the din of the engine and sirens. Suddenly, his beard ripped away, revealing a shaven face underneath.

“Jack?” I sputtered, but she didn't have time to answer. I was looking into the face of our resident private eye.

Jack hit a hard turn, so hard the sidecar's wheels came up off the ground. The dog leaned outward, and I did the same. The sidecar came back down onto its wheels, and we survived the turn. Barely.

“Um, Jack?” I said as we sped along a narrow two-lane road.

“Yes?”

“That’s a chain-link fence ahead of us.”

“Yes, it is,” she said. “Try to keep your limbs inside the sidecar.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” The dog whimpered and shoved his head in my armpit. “Jack? Why aren’t you slowing down?”

I grabbed the dog and hugged us both down into the sidecar. Jack hit the brakes and jackknifed the rear end into the chain-link fence. The sidecar smashed through the gate in between, and then Jack tore off again.

“Look out,” she yelled as we drove right into the terminal itself. People scrambled to get out of our way. She drove us all the way up to the baggage claim and skidded to a halt.

“All right, get off,” she said. “I just committed I don't know how many felonies I need to skitty.”

“Jack, did you plan this whole thing? Wait, how much exactly do you know about the whole thing?”

“They say that you can't play the player. Well, in your case, I could. Or, it is better to say, we could.”

Jack smiled and it looked ominous with prosthetic chin still gangling from her face.

"What do you meanwe? Did you and Jon and the others know about our arrangement?"

Jack winked at me and as pair of security guards charged in for her she took off. Me and the dog watched her leave, both of us panting.

Wait a minute. Me and the dog?

“Jack, you forgot your dog...”

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I looked down at him. He panted up at me in a doggy smile. I noticed he wasn't wearing a collar and could have used a bath.

"You're not Jacks' dog at all, are you?" I sighed. "You're a stray who just happened to be sleeping in the sidecar. Fuck it, let's go find your new mommy."

I took off into the terminal. I knew which airline the firm would use to send the woman I loved to Singapore. There was only one flight left for the day heading there—and it was in the middle of boarding.

I wasn't too late.

"Excuse me," I said to the woman at the sales counter. "I need to speak with one of the passengers on that plane. It's urgent."

She took one look at me—covered in motor oil, duct tape, pigeon feathers, and accompanied by a dirty street dog, and chuckled.

"Yeah, I'll just bet. Move along, pal."

"Come on, I know I probably look and sound like a lunatic—"

"You got that right."

"—but I really need to get on that plane, just for a moment. Please."

"Pal, the only way you're getting on this plane is if you buy a ticket."

“Oh, okay,” I said. “I’ll get one for the dog, too.”

“Pets need to be in a carrier.”

“Not if he’s my therapy pet.”

She gave me a look as if to say ‘are you really going there?’ I nodded firmly. I was going there.

She sighed and punched up her computer. A smirk crossed her face. “I’m sorry, but the only thing available are first-class seats.”

“Perfect,” I said.

She gave me another once-over and pursed her lips.

“Once we add in the last-minute booking fees, and other sundry costs, this ticket is going to cost you well over seven thousand dollars, sir.”

“Sounds good.” I took out my corporate expense card. “Here you go.”

She changed her tune when she saw that.

“M-Mr. Timmons,” she said. “I had no idea.”

“Relax, I’m not here to bust your chops. Just get me on that plane.”

I looked out the window at the terminal.

Hang on, Ivy, I thought. I’m coming. And even if you don’t take me back, I’m going to try and set things right.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ivy

I hadn't flown first class before in my life, and I was shocked to find out how much room I had. The seats were comfortable, could recline all the way, and the cabin proved sparsely populated. Most of the other passengers were situated toward the front of the cabin, while I was near the back. I didn't mind being close to the lavatory. I considered it a fair price for a window seat.

The minor triumph of a window seat wasn't enough to make me feel better, though. Stan was persistent, but I was even more so. I would not allow him to get in his 'rebuttal' or whatever it was he thought he had to say.

I was certain he had it all justified in his head. It didn't matter anymore. If he didn't feel even a little of what I felt for him, I wasn't going to waste my time any longer. As much as it hurt, I needed to make the separation as clean and complete as possible.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

Going to another country would certainly accomplish that. I checked up on what projects I might be managing in Singapore. Not much to go on, so I quickly closed up my laptop and stared out the window, waiting for our turn to actually make it to the runway. Apparently, the airport was quite busy.

I just wanted to get in the air, and leave everything behind. I was sick to my stomach. It hurt, knowing that Stan didn't care about me the way I cared about him.

A murmur rose up in the front of the cabin. I lifted my bleary-eyed gaze from my phone to see the passengers staring in disgusted shock as a big, hairy, smelly dog padded into the cabin.

"What is that dog doing here?" Asked a fifty-ish woman in a plum-hued dress.

"That's not a dog," her apparent grandson said. "That's a horse."

The dog seemed friendly at least. It wagged its tail and padded through the cabin.

"Maybe it's one of those drug-sniffing dogs," a man in a pinstripe suit suggested.

"I think this is just some mangy mongrel," sniped the buxom blonde sitting beside him in a thick Jersey accent. "I bet he's been rolling around in his own feces."

"Hey!" A man stepped into the cabin and thrust a finger at the woman. "Don't talk to him like that. He has feelings, you know."

As if on cue, the dog whined and lowered his head to the ground, covering his face

with his paws. It was so adorable I forgave the dog his dirty appearance. Besides, I suddenly realized I recognized the dog's apparent owner.

Underneath a syrupy glaze—was that honey?—duct tape, feathers, and mud, I saw Stan's face peeking out. He looked like he'd been gone over by a bear. No, make that a whole pack of bears. With rabies.

"Sir, you need to secure this canine," said one of the flight attendants in a shrill voice.

"Hey, have a heart. He's my therapy dog."

"Oh come on," the man in the pinstripe suit said. "I'm going to call bullshit."

"I could do without your judgment pal, I've had a hell of a night. And the dog has already done more for my mental health than you have."

His gaze snapped around the cabin.

"Now if you'll excuse me, there's someone I have to find—"

His mouth fell open, eyes going wide as they fell on me.

"Ivy."

He rushed down the aisle and fell to his knees beside my seat. He smelled like garbage, and I noticed that he had a used tea bag dangling from his collar.

"Stan, what in the fuck—"

"I love you," he blurted.

He said the one thing that could have stopped me short. My mouth snapped shut, and I stared at him in wonder.

“I love you,” he repeated, taking my hand in his own. I was so taken aback by his confession that I didn't even notice the grime. “I had to say that, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to emotionally blackmail you, I'm not, but I had to say that before something else happens or I screw things up again.”

The dog padded over and started licking the food stuck to the back of his head. I don't think Stan noticed.

“I've been falling in love with you a little bit every day,” he said, squeezing my hand. The sincerity in his eyes couldn't have been faked. Could it? I prayed this wasn't going to turn out to be some sort of cruel trick.

“If—if that's true,” I said in a hoarse, dry voice, “then why did you go through with the phony breakup?”

His gaze dropped to the floor, and his shoulders heaved in a big sigh.

“I was afraid of what I was feeling. You see, my mom and dad got divorced when I was a kid. And it was a damn messy divorce, too. Real ugly on a whole lot of levels.” His eyes filled with so much sadness I wanted to comfort him—or I would have if I still hadn't been so pissed off and hurt. “I thought that meant, since my parents' love didn't work out, no one's love would never work out, either. I was afraid I was fooling myself.”

I wanted to believe him, so bad, but after so long faking our emotions, I wasn't sure what was real any longer.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Ivy?” he leaned forward while the flight attendants consulted with the pilot in the background. I’m sure they were trying to figure out what to do with the ‘therapy dog.’ “You have to say something.”

“I don’t know what I can say, Stan.” I dropped my gaze, tearing it away from his own. “I guess after pretending to be in love for so long, I’ve gotten it a little bit mixed up in my head.”

I looked him in the eyes again, and a sob escaped my clenched teeth. I wanted to believe him, to forgive him, so bad. But I knew I owed it to myself to say what I had to say.

“I just don’t know how much of what you said and did was real, and how much was an act,” I finished. My words seemed banal and stupid to my own ears.

“It was all real,” he said, holding my hand again. “It was all real, Ivy. I swear that it was. I never felt so, so golden as I did when I was with you. It was like no matter what, I couldn’t close so long as I had you with me.”

“What about the breakup? Was that real, too?”

“No, I didn’t want to go through with it,” he gasped. “You have to believe me. I wasn’t thinking clearly, all right? It took me a while to realize that I was in love with you.”

“Why?” The tears streamed down my eyes. A couple of passengers turned on the air vents due to Stan’s aromatic state. “Why did it take you so long? Why did you wait

until the absolute last minute?”

“I never knew what love was before. I’d never experienced it.” His voice trembled ever so slightly. “I know now that what I feel is real, and that it’s love. I really love you, Ivy. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and no other.”

“Aww,” said the old woman in the peach-hued dress. “It’s so sweet.”

“Are they going to kiss, grandma?” asked the kid.

“Hey, nobody’s kissing anybody!” I snapped. I turned to Stan, feeling angry and flustered and flattered and like I wanted to both kill and kiss him at the same time. “Oh god, Stan, I just don’t know what to say.”

“Do you love me?”

“I—I’m not sure that’s relevant,” I said.

“Not relevant?” He blurted.

“Not relevant?” blurted the pilot.

“Do you fucking mind?” I sputtered to him and everyone else.

“No, I don’t mind at all, please continue,” he said.

“Never mind them, Ivy,” Stan said. He turned my face to meet his gaze. “Just look at me. Do you love me or not?”

“I don’t—this feels like an ambush.” I snapped. “God damn it, Stan. You were so good to me sometimes, and then you broke my heart. I wanted so bad for you to feel

the same way that I did, but then you wanted to, to pull the trigger on the fake breakup, and you said that's what you wanted—"

"I didn't even know what I wanted then," he said, his features blurry through my tears. "Now I do. Now I know exactly what I want. You."

"Stan..." I sighed.

"Do you love me, Ivy?" He stood up, still holding my hand. "If you tell me that you don't, I'm going to turn around and leave and never bother you again. I'll take my dog and go home."

The mongrel whimpered, and he reached down to pet its head.

"But if you, on the other hand," he said, face lighting up with hope and joy. "If you say that you do love me, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to get down on my hands and knees and beg you for another chance. And if you give me that chance, I'm going to spend every day of my life proving to you that it was the right decision. I want to love you, Ivy."

He wound down, looking a bit sheepish. The plum-dressed lady sniffled. The jersey girl snorted.

"I'd wait until I saw the size of the rock before making my decision honey."

"Seriously?" Stan sputtered, glaring in her direction. He shook his head, and turned back to face me. "Never mind. Do you love me, Ivy?"

I looked at him. I remembered how much it hurt when he ended our fake relationship. But I also remembered the good times. The great times. The extra steamy times.

I remembered the way he'd made me feel. Like I was the only woman in the entire world.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“I do love you,” I said, and the passengers and flight crew erupted into cheers.

“It’s like a movie,” plum dress woman said.

“Yeah, a boring one with kissing and junk,” her grandson added.

Stan’s gaze never wavered even with all those distractions.

“But do you forgive me?” He asked softly. “Can you forgive me?”

I took a deep breath.

“I think so,” I said. “As long as you promise never to hurt me again.”

“Oh god, Ivy,” he said, fawning all over me in a totally out-of-character way. “Oh god, I promise you I’ll never hurt you again. I’m so sorry I didn’t call off the stupid plan weeks ago, when it was obvious it wasn’t a fake relationship anymore.”

“It did turn real, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said. “It did.”

His face split in a wide smile.

“Now, I do believe the intelligent young lad over there said there should be kissing and junk...”

He leaned his face in toward mine, but I stopped him with a palm to the forehead.

“You’re not kissing me, buster,” I said. “Not until you get a shower and a change of clothes. You smell like a pile of dog shit.”

The dog whimpered and gave me those puppy eyes despite the fact he was the size of a god damn house.

“No offense, pooch,” I said.

Stan burst into laughter, and after a moment, so did the other passengers, the flight crew, even the pilot.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess I’m not going to Singapore.”

“Does this mean the smelly dog’s not coming?” asked the guy in the pinstripe suit.

“No,” Stan said.

“Good.”

“Come on, pooch,” Stan said, petting the dog’s head. “Let’s you and me both go get ourselves a bath.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Stan

It took the help of an outlaw biker gang, a street mutt with a butt of mange and a heart of gold, one slightly confused pigeon, and a lot of buttinski first-class passengers and flight crew, but I did it.

I managed to win Ivy back. For the first time. For real, I mean. I was tired of worrying if things had been fake or not. All I knew was that it felt damn real to me.

Ivy didn't take the project manager position, choosing to stay in New York instead. She wound up getting promoted to staff supervisor in the accounting division, which is a step on the ladder toward upper management.

As for me, well, life went on only it was way better since I had Ivy in it. Sure, I had to eat my humble pie. My vaunted plan to make my friends believe in a phony relationship all to prove love didn't exist had blown up in my face. The part about selling our fake relationship went off without a hitch.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that was due to the fact we weren't faking our feelings. Not really. Life imitates art, art imitates life. Or something. I'm a businessman, not a philosopher.

As the months passed, Ivy and I grew even closer. She wound up not renewing her lease, and moved in with me instead. It just made more sense, as she was spending most of her nights here anyway.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I think we were closing in on our six-month anniversary—that would be our real anniversary, and not the start of the fake relationship—when it hit me that the next logical step was to ask her to marry me.

I didn't want to do something lame like have the ring in a glass of wine at a French restaurant or something like that. I decided to consult with experts on the matter, namely her parents.

Mr. and Mrs. Newman were more than willing to help. They told me that there was something of a tradition in their family of practical jokes. The more that I surprised and tricked their daughter, the better. Or so they believed.

Besides, my last prank didn't turn out quite as I planned it. Don't get me wrong, I was happy with the results, but I still wanted to prove that I still had it.

We tried to come up with an idea of how to totally surprise her. I shot down the idea of any kind of party or dinner as being too obvious. Her father wanted me to do it at work, and I hated the idea. I loved work, but I didn't want the boardroom to be the place I popped the question.

Too many skanky broads had been banged on that table—not by me, of course. I had class.

Finally, we settled on a plan so devious that there was no way she would ever be able to see through it. I needed their help, as well as that of Jack and her handy disguise kit.

The plan was pretty simple. I would become, with the aid of prosthetics, clothes, and (hopefully) good acting, an old, irate dry cleaning customer with a complaint.

I would demand to speak to the manager, and Ivy's family would conspire to make her the one to have to deal with me. Just when I was raising hell and she got to the point where she was going to throw me out or call the cops, I would suddenly go down on one knee, pull off the disguise, and pop the question.

As the appointed day drew near, I grew increasingly nervous. Ivy was sharp as a tack, and she knew right away that something wasn't the same with me. She knew I was up to something, even if she didn't necessarily know what that was.

I coordinated things with her family. They would see to it she was manning the counter at the dry-cleaning shop around four PM, the slowest part of the day. I would meet with Jack at one PM and begin my transformation into a cranky codger.

I gave Ivy the slip at the office and snuck off to Jack's place in the village. She sat me down in a chair and blew air out of her lips, stirring her bangs.

"What's your problem?"

"Your face is all wrong."

"Are you kidding me?"

"For the prosthetics I have, you fucking goofball. Geez, vain much? Your hopefully soon-to-be fiance thinks you're cute, that's all that should matter."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Oh, I'm going to work miracles as usual." She made a rectangle with the thumb and

forefingers of both hands and put me in the middle of it. “Okay, let’s make you into a huge pain in the ass.”

She applied a fake chin and jowls to me, held on with spirit gum and hope. Then she layered makeup on top of that, helping to even out my complexion. A gray-haired wig, and bushy beard helped complete my look. At least, from the neck up.

I slipped into a pair of pants so ugly they’d be disallowed on a golf course for the blind. They came all the way up past my waist and navel, practically to my nipple line. I put on a collared shirt and tucked it in—of course.

We had about an hour before I had to meet up with Ivy for our little encounter. So Jack spent that time teaching me to act old. Mostly, it involved moving slower than I did normally. I was supposed to think of my body as something that had been broken a few times, and I was taking it easy with the chassis so to speak.

I drove to Staten Island and parked my car a good block away. Then I shuffled down the sidewalk to the tailor shop, a ticket clenched in my hand.

I had to wonder about Ivy’s parents. They were the ones who had come up with the rather devious ticket. It was designed to be not only incomprehensible, but utterly undecipherable as well. It would frustrate her to no end, and I could pretend to be more antsy than ever.

Remember, her parents put me up to this shit. I just went along for the ride.

I spotted her standing behind the counter. I stopped by the window and grinned, then put on my best grumpy face and shuffled into the shop.

She smiled at me as I entered, counting change out of her hand into the till.

“Hi,” she said cheerfully. “I’ll be with you in just a moment if that’s okay.”

She went back to counting the money in her hand. I came up and slammed the ticket down on the counter and glared at her from behind my coke bottle thick glasses.

This was it. The moment of truth. Would my disguise pass muster? Or would she see through it immediately?

“It’s not okay,” I snapped in a reedy voice. “I’m a customer and I demand to be treated like a priority.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“I’m sorry sir, I’m almost done,” she said, still trying to be nice. “Just let me finish here—”

“Sixteen,” I snapped. “A dollar forty-five. Twelve cents.”

She paused in her count, eyes narrowing. The skin on her face tightened, turned subtly red as she closed her fist around the change.

“Okay, I guess maybe I can count this change later.”

“You’re goddamn right you can,” I snapped. “I’m a customer, and I demand satisfaction.”

My plan was to get her all riled up, offering me coupons and such to calm me down, until I told her ‘the only thing that will satisfy me is your hand in marriage.’ Then I would get down on my knee and she would be all happy, and maybe cry, I don’t know.

“Oh, you demand satisfaction, do you?” She looked down at the ticket on the counter. “I take it this is what’s causing you so much stress?”

“You’re damn right it is. I brought you a blue oxford shirt. The orders were to remove a mustard stain on the breast pocket, repair a seam on the left sleeve, and let out the collar by three inches.”

She unfurled the crumpled ticket and her brow furrowed in confusion.

“What in the heck? Who was working that day? I’ve never seen a ticket filled out like this.”

“I don’t know, it was one of them girls or something,” I snapped. “I can’t remember exactly. What I can remember is that you didn’t do any of the work on my shirt I requested and then you hit my credit card twice for the charges.”

“Okay, sir, I’m trying to sort this out for you—”

“Well, sort faster, goddamnit,” I snapped, slapping my hand down on the table.

She paused, and her nostrils flared. Her skin darkened just a bit, and when she spoke it was in a clipped tone.

“Sir, I’m doing my very best to help you here. Please don’t slam your hand on the counter again, as it’s very distracting.”

“Oh, you mean like this?” I slapped my hand on the counter again, looking her right in the eye. “Is that what you don’t want me to do? This?”

I slapped it again. She crumpled up the ticket in her hand.

“Yes,” she hissed through clenched teeth. “Now wait just a minute, I’m going to run this receipt through the computer and see what comes back.”

“Hurry up,” I snapped.

She stepped over to her terminal. She typed about three numbers and then I slapped the counter again.

Her gaze shot at me, and a withering one it was. I was fully caught up in my

character, though, and missed the warning signs.

“There was a fly.”

“Sir, if you do that one more time—”

I slapped the counter. Then I did it again, and suddenly I was slapping out a wicked rendition of a John Bonham drum solo. I got so caught up in what I was doing, I missed that she had come out from behind the counter.

“Get out of here,” she snapped, striking me with a rolled-up newspaper. Like I was a dog.

“Hey,” I sputtered, running away from her. “Cut that out.”

“Get out, get out, get OUT.” She chased me into the street. I tripped over my prop cane, or maybe it was the whole socks with sandals thing. Anyway, I went down in a heap, but she was so livid she just kept hitting me in the face with the newspaper.

“Hey,” I said “Hey, stop. Ivy!”

She paused in her attack, arm drawn back for another blow.

“It’s me, Ivy,” I said, pulling off the wig and glasses. The prosthetics came off a bit more stubborn, but I got them mostly cleared away in seconds.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Stan?” She dropped the newspaper from nerveless fingers. “What—what in the hell were you doing?”

“Well, I guess since I’m already on the ground...”

I got up to one knee, and then produced the ring box.

“Ivy, will you marry me?”

Her hand flew in front of her mouth, and she paled to be white as a sheet. A single tear rolled down her cheek, and then she stuck her hand out toward me, fingers splayed.

“Yes,” she said in a voice barely above a whisper. I slipped the ring on her finger, my heart pounding in my chest.

“You’ve made me a very happy—”

She attacked me with the newspaper again, having picked it up off the ground.

“You big jerk! I really didn’t know it was you, you bastard!”

“Ivy, come on,” I said, trying to retreat. “I think the business end of the newspaper landed in dog shit.”

“That’s supposed to stop me how?”

Well, at least she said yes.

Epilogue One

Ivy

I did agree to marry Stan, even though I wanted to kill him at the same time. He just had no idea how tough it is in retail, dealing with customers like that. The sad thing was, I'd actually dealt with worse customers before, at least right up until he started trying to play the bongos on my sales counter.

Maybe I kind of knew it was Stan all along. I mean, it would explain why I lost my temper. Though, quite frankly, assault with a rolled-up newspaper seemed somehow appropriate given his crime.

The wedding day drew near, and I treated it like an upcoming vacation at the world's greatest theme park. I knew this would be my only wedding, ever, and I wanted to make it truly epic and memorable.

To that end, we went with a rooftop wedding on top of the firm's building. There was a fabulous green space up there, complete with a koi pond and an elegantly arched bridge that went over it.

We were to be wed on the bridge itself, meeting each other in the middle. Our wedding planner said it was a really good idea and praised it endlessly.

Our families came in for the rehearsal and follow-up dinner. Of course, my immediate family was close at hand, but I had plenty of other aunts, uncles, and more cousins that you could shake a stick at.

I got to meet Stan's parents. His mother and I got along pretty good right away. I

liked her fiance, Ernesto. They seemed really happy together.

Stan's father was very kind to me as well and seemed grateful that I was marrying his son. I think he was a little sad to see his ex-wife so happy with another man, but then later he was dancing with my thrice-divorced aunt Victoria, so you know, sometimes love finds a way.

On the day of my wedding, they erected white tents on top of the building to give the bride and groom places to prepare. Stan wasn't supposed to see me, but only two thin strips of canvas separated us from each other. Still, there was so much noise and tumult that he might as well have been a hundred miles away, or at least on a different rooftop.

I paced back and forth in the tent, trying to eat up nervous energy. My mother put her hands on her hips and glared at me.

"Ivy Marie, you stop pacing right this moment. You're going to step on your dress and get it dirty."

I looked down at my gown, a white Gahlia Lahav dress with off-the-shoulder statement sleeves. The off-the-shoulder puffs cinched at the elbow and again at the wrist, resulting in two gauzy clouds; the rest of the ensemble was just as dreamy, thanks to a regal, boned bodice and silver beading.

It was one hell of a dress, and I'd fallen in love with it at first sight.

"Sorry, Mom," I said, starting to sit down.

"No, don't sit down either!" She came to me and took my hands. "Just try to stand there and concentrate on staying pretty."

“Ma, for god’s sake,” my sister Irene said. “Would you crawl out of her nose? You’re going to give her issues.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Why would I give her issues?”

“Concentrate on staying pretty? That’s like ten years of therapy right there, in and of itself.”

The curtain flap parted. “The groom is almost to his end of the bridge.”

I nodded to the wedding planner. “I’m all set.”

“No you’re not,” Isabelle said, handing me my bouquet of red and yellow peonies. “Now you’re ready.”

“Not quite, the veil,” my mother blurted. “She needs her veil.”

“Yeah, because Stan totally doesn’t know what I look like.”

Mom glared at me, and I sighed. “Okay, Okay.”

I thought my dress looked better sans a veil, but my mother was a stickler for tradition. So, the veil went over my expertly braided hair.

I stepped out of the tent and found my father waiting for me. He looked me up and down and sighed.

“You look as beautiful as your mother did on our wedding day.”

“Dad, don’t be a sap,” I said.

My smile belied my words. He took me down the aisle, and then left me at my side of the bridge.

We met in the middle. I think I couldn't stop laughing through the whole ceremony. Stan and I just stared into each other's eyes, unable to deal with the fact we felt so self-conscious. After all the planning, and decorations and timing, it all seemed downright silly.

I was looking forward to what came after the wedding, if you catch my drift.

Stan lifted my veil and pressed his lips on top of my own. It was a sweet kiss, but it got my motor running nonetheless. I couldn't wait to get him back to our hotel room and get him all to myself.

We walked out as husband and wife, into a waiting limo which took us to the reception. My mother cried a little, and so did my father when we danced. One of the office girls caught the bouquet, which set off all sorts of new rounds of speculation.

At last, Stan and I left the reception hall, the cool night air enveloping us.

"Oh thank god," I said, as we climbed into the back of the limo. I got out of my heels and gasped, rubbing my feet. "That's so much better."

"Yes, it was quite the reception, wasn't it?"

"You're telling me. I don't think I've ever danced so much in heels. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't trade it for a moment, but I'm glad to be out of there all the same."

"Excuse me, sir?"

We looked up to the limo driver, who wore a sheepish expression.

“I’m afraid traffic is so snarled it’s going to take two hours to get to the airport. I’ve checked all the routes, and that’s the fastest way.”

“No worries,” Stan said.

He pushed a button and the privacy screen went up. He turned to me and smiled.

“You know, this limo does have tinted windows...”

He took me in his arms and kissed me hard and rough. His hands sought my breasts through the gauzy folds of my dress. I didn’t want my dress to get messed up, so I pushed him away.

His confusion turned to delight when I slipped out of the dress, pushing it down to reveal my demi cup, strapless bra. It didn’t conceal anything so much as present what I had in a most elegantly slutty way. His eyes bulged out of his head as I slid the dress off my legs and folded it carefully, then placed it on the opposite seat.

“No panties?” He said, his eyes gleaming.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“Well, I thought you’d sneak me off somewhere during the reception and throw my skirt up to consummate this here marriage, but our relatives never gave us the chance.”

“No, the rat bastards, they did not.” He reached out and took my wrist. I squealed as he dragged me into his lap. My laugh faded as he gave me a truly molten look.

He mashed his lips on top of my own, tongue probing inside to lash against my own. He caressed my breasts with his palm, alternating between them as he molded and squeezed them to his whims.

“God, I love playing with your body,” he moaned.

I cried out as a tremble shot through my body, with the epicenter in my clitoris. He slipped a hand down between my thighs. His fingers curled in and found my already wet pussy, rubbing and teasing the swollen lips.

“I see your little pussy is wet,” he growled.

“Yes, it is,” I gasped. “That feels so good.”

“Oh, you like it when I touch you like this?” His fingers insinuated themselves into my soft folds. I moaned as he used a pussy juice slickened knuckle to rub my clit. He slid down until he knelt on the floor of the limo. Stan pushed my thighs apart and shoved his face into my pussy.

I cried out as he lapped at my juices. He ran his finger between my swollen pussy

lips, making plenty of sexy grunt and growls. He didn't just enjoy eating my pussy. Stan reveled in eating my pussy.

He mouthed my inner lips, his tongue slipping in and gently teasing me open even wider. Stan sucked on my outer labia, stretching them while his fingers stroked over my clit with increasing speed.

"Oh god," I cried. "Oh god, don't stop, please."

He pushed fingers into my pussy, stretching my lip out like taffy. The combination of sensation, and most of all his juice-slickened fingers stroking my clitoris, proved to be the ideal combination for that moment.

My mouth flew open and I arched my back, cumming insanely hard. I let out a series of screams, my voice growing more ragged with each one. I squirted all over Stan's face, but he didn't even slow down. He kept right on eating me out.

I started to come back down, but he caught me with nimble ministrations of his tongue and moved me right back up again. Stan enveloped my clitoris, hood and all, inside of his mouth. Then he sucked, noisy, wetly, and my eyes rolled back as my entire body shook like a leaf in a hurricane.

I let out a piercing scream, then flopped around on the seat like a fish. He got up on the seat beside me, struggling out of his clothes.

His magnificent cock came into view, and I just had to touch it. My fingers wouldn't quite go all the way around his thick, veined shaft. I watched as a big squishy vein pulsed near my thumb.

I looked him in the eye as I bent down and licked his crown. He gasped, eyes squeezing shut and watering as I enveloped the crown inside my mouth. I sucked

with varying speed and intensity, feeling him get hard as a rock inside my mouth.

“That’s it,” he growled. “I can’t take it anymore. I need to feel myself buried inside that tight little pussy.”

He grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled my mouth off of him. I gasped as he dragged me into a different position on his lap, so my legs straddled him. I lifted my haunches and positioned myself over his erect cock.

I moaned as his crown pushed past my slippery, swollen pussy lips. Inch by inch, he invaded my pussy as I lowered myself onto his lap. My eyes squeezed shut as it went in all the way, my body flush with his own.

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “I feel so full.”

He kissed my neck, his lips and tongue sliding along my skin. I rocked my hips hard toward him, rewarded by intense pulses of pleasure which shot through my pussy to spread to the rest of my body like wildfire.

I swiveled my hips, gyrating like a whirling dervish in his lap. It felt so good to ride his cock. My weight pushed him deep inside of me. He hooked his hands under my arms and lifted me up, moving in concert with my body. I rode his cock up and down, my cries growing louder and shriller as I approached the precipice of orgasm.

I leaned against him, panting, whimpering like an animal in need. I was so close, so very close. I rode him hard, surfing the waves of ecstasy shooting through my body at the tip of his cock.

It built up until fireworks exploded behind my eyelids, wreaking havoc on my brain. I lost all control, thrashing and writhing and shaking all over his lap as I came harder than I ever had in my entire life.

He cradled me to his body as the aftershocks continued to push me along like ocean waves. I tensed and gasped, little soft moans and cries escaping my parted lips as he laid me onto the seat.

Stan caressed the hair out of my eyes and smiled down at me. I smiled weakly up at him, my limbs trembling like they had rubber bones.

“Oh my god, baby,” he said, kissing me. “That was so hot.”

“Yeah it was,” I said, then I gave him a wicked grin.

“What?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

“I was just thinking—it was super hot, and the honeymoon hasn’t even officially begun.”

Epilogue Two

Stan

For our honeymoon, I took Ivy on a yacht trip from Morocco to Venice, hugging the coastline along the way.

When we arrived in Venice, I surprised her with a cottage-style manor house overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. She stood on the back porch and gaped at the sun-splashed sea crawling toward the rocky shore far below.

“This is amazing. What a view.”

She cut a magnificent figure in her white lace sundress. The stiff sea breeze pressed it tightly around her body like a sheath. The bags from our recent shopping excursion still dangled from her fingers.

“I knew you’d like it. I happened upon this cottage when I was out on a hike many years ago, and I immediately fell in love with it. It’s fully refurbished and modernized on the inside. Most importantly, with central air.”

She laughed, even though her forehead glistened with sweat.

“I really don’t mind the heat. Air conditioning is nice, don’t get me wrong, but I

wouldn't want Italy to be anything other than Italy.”

I held the rear door open for her, and we ventured back inside. The scored concrete floors were broken up by area rugs with a definite Greek flair. Nymphs and satyrs chased each other around ancient glades under our feet as I gave her a tour of the rest of the house.

We passed a door on our way to the bedroom with a lock on it. She paused beside it and pointed.

“What’s in here that’s so important you need to put a lock on it?”

“This lock is hardly secure.” I used a small key to open the tiny padlock. “Really it could be torn off with relative ease, it’s just a privacy lock so when the cleaning staff come by they don’t wander in here by accident.”

I took the padlock off and opened the door. She walked inside and started laughing.

“Okay, I can see why you wouldn’t want them to wander in here.”

“I just don’t want to embarrass them,” I said. “I’m not ashamed of anything in here.”

The room featured a domed skylight which lent an air of being outdoors without the heat or weather. There was a bed near a sea-side facing window, but the middle of the room was dominated by a collection of straps and suspension known colloquially as a sex swing.

A shelf to the left of the entrance was lined with high-quality sex toys, all of them freshly unwrapped and waiting to be used.

Ivy turned around and I took her in my arms, kissing her hard, deep. The bags

slapped the floor as they slipped from her fingers. Ivy embraced me back, her hands roaming around my body as I lashed my tongue against her own.

We came up for air, and I put my hand on her cheek. She turned her face into it, kissing my palm and putting my thumb in her mouth. I swept my hand back and gathered up her hair, stroking my fingers through it. My other hand groped her breasts through the thin dress. Underneath, she'd gone with the Euro fashion and not worn a bra.

My fingers sought out her nipple through the thin material. She moaned into my mouth as I pinched her sensitive skin, increasing the pressure by tiny degrees as I thrust my tongue into her mouth.

Her hand slid down and caressed the growing bulge below my belt. I felt my cock twitch hard as it began to engorge with hot blood. I burned for her. I burned for my wife,

Any and all thoughts about fake relationships were long since past. Now I just wanted to ravish her with every fiber of my being.

I pulled away from her, but maintained my hold on her nipple. I walked backward, using her pinched flesh like a leash. She went along with it, her lips slightly parted as she let out breathy pants.

I released her nipple and then grabbed the hem of her dress. I slipped my hand underneath, sliding it up along the curve of her hip. Her eyes fluttered closed, a soft gasp escaping from her ruby red lips. I slid my hand between her thighs, and up toward her heated pussy.

My arm had vanished under her dress up to the shoulder. I felt around until I found the satiny softness of her panties. I ran my fingers through the groove of her pussy,

feeling her up through the silken fabric.

“It feels like you’re getting wet,” I murmured, my free hand sweeping under her skirt and around to fondle her magnificent ass. “Should I move the panties over and check?”

“Oh god,” she moaned, her cheeks flushing red.

I hooked my fingers through the triangle of silk and then pulled up and out. I hiked up her skirt to her waist, rewarded with a view of her swollen pussy lips on either side of the white silk panties bifurcating them. I tugged up, working the silk through her pussy and enjoying the symphony of gasps and sighs she made.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

She let out something akin to an eager, plaintive whimper when I hooked my fingers into the hem of her panties and tugged them down a few inches. Bit by bit, her sweet pussy was fully revealed to me.

“Your pussy smells so good,” I growled. I pulled her panties down to her ankles and then she stepped out of them, bracing her hands on my shoulders for balance.

I pulled the dress up, over her body, stripping her naked. My mouth enveloped her breast, suckling on the nipple I’d tormented earlier. My hands swept around to her ass, squeezing and kneading the cheeks. I spread them wide open as I worked over her nipple.

I moved my mouth down to her belly, kissing the sensitive flesh there. I ran my tongue over her sweet skin, then went further still.

I pulled her down on top of me, laying on my back. I arranged it so she sat on my face. I exulted in the sensation of her sweet, dripping wet folds enveloping my lips and tongue. I thrust my face up into her pussy, licking and sucking all her sweet juices.

“Oh god,” she cried, hands braced on the headboard. “That feels so good.”

I worked her over with my lips and tongue, sucking, licking, getting thoroughly drenched in her ambrosia like pussy juice. She came and squirted all over me, which was like being anointed with holy oil.

She collapsed on her side, panting heavily as her body shook from aftershock

orgasms. I used my discarded shirt to wipe my face, and then kissed her deeply. She eagerly met it, and her hand on my rigid cock let me know she was far from finished.

“So,” she purred up at me with a shy smile. “How’s that swing thing work?”

“I’ll show you.”

I slid out of bed, taking her hand and gently tugging her into a sitting position. Her legs were a little wobbly from her recent climax. I turned her back toward the swing and then arched my brows.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“Yes—oh!”

I picked her up under the haunches and gently placed her in the swing. She was nervous at first, but gradually relaxed when she realized it easily supported her weight.

“This is... different,” she said.

“Different good or different bad?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Maybe you should start doing stuff to me and we’ll see where it goes.”

I went to the shelf and selected what looked like a silicone brush handle, with a sculpted cone arched upward at the end. Her eyes widened.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s a fun little toy.” I grabbed my throbbing cock and just took in the sight of her magnificent naked body splayed out before me. She’d hooked her thighs into the support straps, and now hung suspended with her pussy wide open.

I ran the big crown of my cock through her pussy lips. She moaned, shifting her weight to make the swing move toward me. I grabbed one of the suspension straps and held her steady as I slid my cock between her well-lubed labia. Her mouth flew open in a deep guttural moan as I glided in all the way.

I took the suction device and placed it over her nipple. I flipped on the switch and started thrusting at the same time. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she cried out sharply.

“Oh fuck,” she groaned, her pussy spasming around my cock as I pulled it in and out of her. With her weight supported by the swing, every thrust glided smooth and even. I squinted my eyes with the effort of not blowing my wad right away. I loved fucking her sweet pussy.

I turned off the suction device and moved it to the opposite nipple. She whimpered as I flipped it back on. Her hands gripped the suspension straps tightly as I used the swing to aid in my thrusts. I pulled her toward me on the way in, and pushed her away on the path back out.

“Oh god,” she groaned. “Oh god, I’m gonna cum so hard—”

She screamed, a long, high-pitched cry punctuated by the rhythmic slap of our sweaty bodies. I fucked her harder and brought the suction device down to her clitoris at last. I flipped on the switch. Her mouth flew open, and her breasts thrust upward as she sucked in a huge gasp of air.

She let it out as a wailing, undulating scream, shivering like mad in the sex swing. I

slammed into her with powerful thrusts, struggling not to blow inside of her yet. Finally, I couldn't hold back any longer and I came like a monster inside of her.

I flipped off the suction device and let it lay on her belly. I leaned on the straps, my cock still buried inside of her, and caressed Ivy's cheek.

She hung there in the swings, shaking and trembling like a bowl of jelly. I caressed her breasts and she cried out, her pussy clamping down on my cock as she came again.

"Oh god," she moaned. "Oh god, oh god, oh god, they just keep coming."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I started thrusting again, my hands grasping the straps for support. Her cries rose up once again. I enjoyed the sight of her breasts bouncing crazily as I fucked her hard. Ivy arched her back in the swing and squirmed about, cumming hard as I shot another load into her pussy.

I leaned heavily on the straps as my now flaccid cock slipped out of her. Gently, I took her out of the swing and carried her to the bed.

I laid her on her back and then got in the bed beside her. I cradled her head in the crook of my arm and just petted her lustrous black mane while she recovered.

“Oh god,” she sighed. “I think I’m finally done. I’ve never come so much in my entire life.”

“Me neither,” I said. “I’m surprised my balls haven’t shriveled to the size of raisins.”

She gave me an exhausted, scoffing laugh.

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

I pulled her in tightly against me and kissed the top of her head.

“I love you, Ivy.”

“I love you, too.” She rolled over onto her side, laying on my stomach and chest. Ivy fixed me with a frank gaze, her brows arching in query.

“What?” I prompted when she just kept staring at me.

“Did you ever think it was going to work out like this?”

I gave her a long, somber look.

“I think, maybe, on the inside, I always knew it would work out like this.”

“And yet you went through with the fake relationship anyway.”

I shrugged. “I guess I did.”

She smiled sweetly, and then kissed me tenderly. At least, it started out tender. I soon found she wasn’t nearly as exhausted as I’d thought.

Not that I’m complaining.

Epilogue Three

Ivy

The Cyclone trundled past, rattling the wooden rafters arcing like gridwork hills above us. A susurrus of the metal wheels on steel tracks mingled with the awed, happy cries of those riding it.

The four-year-old girl walking between Stan and I, holding onto both of our hands, looked up at me with query dancing in her green eyes.

“Mommy, I wanna go on the Cyclone.”

“You’re not big enough yet,” I said.

“But I want to.”

Stan got that look in his eye. I caught his glance and shook my head.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“Think about what?”

“Mom,” Lindsey said “I wanna go on the horsies. Am I big enough for that?”

“Yes, sweetie,” I said, moving toward the line for the carousel. “Yes, you’re big enough for the horsies.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

We watched as she clambered onto a red horse, dimpled face split with a delighted smile. She waved happily at us as the music started.

“Mommy, Daddy, look at me!” she said as she went around.

“I see you, honey,” Stan called out.

He turned to me and cocked an eyebrow.

“What did you mean, don’t even think about it?”

I put my hands on my hips and affixed him with a stern gaze. He had the decency to blanch.

“What?” he asked.

“So, are you going to tell me,” I said very slowly, “that you were NOT just thinking about building our daughter a four-year-old-sized roller coaster in our backyard?”

He smiled sheepishly and spread his hands.

“No, I’m not going to tell you that I wasn’t thinking exactly that.” He gave me a quizzical look. “I have to ask, though, why are you against the idea? It’s not like we don’t have the money.”

I waved at Lindsey as she came around on the red horse again. Then I turned to my husband.

“Oh, where do I begin? First and foremost, you don’t need to spoil her more than she already is.” I ticked my points off on my manicured fingers. “She already has a pony, a virtual reality headset she never uses, a trampoline, and most especially a go-kart track in our back yard already.”

“You and I use the go-kart track more than her and you know it.”

“Besides the point,” I said, again waving to Lindsay as she came around on the ride. “And you’d better not give me grief about the go-kart track again, if you ever want to play King Bowser and Princess Peach ever again.”

“My lips are sealed,” he said quickly.

“Now, even if our daughter wasn’t ridiculously spoiled already—which she totally is, as we’ve established—there’s a reason why they don’t have four-year-old-sized roller coasters. Their bodies are still developing. If there were a need for four-year-old roller coasters, they would have made them already.”

“Okay, okay,” Stan said. “You’ve convinced me.”

“Besides, think about it, it’s an important milestone for her to grow into. Don’t try to rush things. Let her be a little kid.”

“When did you get so much wiser than me?”

I gave him a look.

“Baby, I’ve always been wiser than you.”

The carousel ride ended and we went to collect our daughter. Lindsey jumped up and down in her excitement.

“Did you see me? Did you see me go round and round?”

“We saw you,” I said.

“I took some pictures,” Stan said, showing her his cell phone. Lindsey’s eyes got big as dinner plates.

“Dad,” she said, “you didn’t get my good side.”

“Someone’s a diva,” he said with a laugh.

“She gets that from your side of the family, not mine. Let’s be clear on that.”

Stan laughed, and leaned in over Lindsey’s head to kiss me.

“Mom,” Lindsey said. “I’m hungry.”

“Then let’s go eat,” I said.

“I want funnel cake.”

“Only after we have some real food first,” I said.

“It’s Coney Island,” Stan said gently. “I’m not sure they have any real food here.”

“Then what do you propose?”

He pointed across the street to a food truck.

“I propose tortas and quesadillas and tacos.”

“Tacos?” Lindsey said, her mouth agape.

“Now you’ve gone and done it,” I said with a laugh and a sigh.

“Tacos, tacos, I want tacos! Tacos dance!”

Linsey did her ‘taco dance’, which looked an awful lot like what might happen if you electrocuted a monkey high on crack cocaine. Stan recorded her and I covered my face with embarrassment.

“Why in god’s name are you recording this of all things for posterity?”

“You’re not looking at the big picture, my love,” Stan said with a smile. “This will all

be great blackmail material later. Say, if she doesn't get good grades, we'll show these videos to her dates."

"Ew, I'd never go on a date," Lindsay said as we joined the line for the food truck. "Boys are gross."

"Yes, that's perfect," Stan said. "I want you to keep thinking that all the way through high school. Preferably college. In fact, don't go on a date until I'm dead."

"Oh, Stan," I said, pinching his cheek. He laughed like a schoolboy. I adored him so much. "You might as well get an old gun to clean anytime a boy shows up on the porch."

"That's not a bad idea. I was thinking of taking up karate so I could, you know, split a stack of bricks with my forehead or something when they came up the sidewalk."

"Thank goodness we've got a decade before she starts dating."

"At least a decade," he corrected me.

When we got to the front of the line of the taco truck, Stan suddenly turned to me.

"I'll be right back with drinks." He pointed at a row of picnic tables. "Can you and Lindsey wait for me there?"

"Sure, but what's wrong with the drinks that they sell here?"

"Nothing." He kissed me and headed off into the crowd. I got to the window and lifted Lindsey up so she could see.

"What do you want?"

“Tacos,” she said.

“We know that, but what kind?”

“Al pastor,” she said. “Ten of them.”

The guy at the counter laughed.

“She means give her two of those.”

I ordered for Stan and myself and then settled in at the picnic tables. The air was just that perfect fall crisp, plenty warm for shorts but not sticky and hot. I wondered at how my life had changed so much since I’d started the fake relationship with my now very real husband.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:49 am

I smoothed out Lindsey's hair, smiling down at her. Being a mother was the biggest change, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. Stan made for an incredibly—some would say surprisingly—devoted and adept father. If only he wouldn't try to spoil her so much.

A few moments later, Stan arrived at our table, carefully bearing three drinks in his hand. The plastic-tiered cups were clear, allowing me to see the liquid he carried within. One of them was dark with a frothy head—root beer for our daughter. The other two were light amber beers, minus the root.

“Guess what kind of beer they have on tap?” He asked proudly.

“Mastercraft?” I asked.

“Mastercraft,” he said with a nod. He took a sip and sighed. “You know, I used to pity my friends when they said they were taking their families out for a day of fun.”

“You did, did you?” I smiled at him and arched my brows. “And how do you feel about that now?”

“Like I was pitying the wrong person. Instead of thinking they were the ones suffering I think I really was.” He shook his head. “The things I used to think mattered the most, mattered the least.”

“If you could go back to those days, those halcyon days of bachelorhood, would you do it?” I asked.

He took some time to consider his answer, which didn't offend me one bit. Stan and I were as secure in our marriage as a couple could be.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I feel like, when I look back on it, I was only living half a life. My life is full now, and I wouldn't go back to the way things were for all the money in the world."

I smiled and leaned across the table to kiss him.

"Ew, gross," Lindsey said.

We broke into laughter which rolled merrily up into the perfect azure sky.

The End