



# My Possessive Billionaire: Our Fake Marriage

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** What could be worse than having a one-night stand with a ruthless billionaire?

Marrying one, of course.

Mr. Evan Jones is not a typical billionaire though.

Yes, he is mind-numbingly hot, filthy rich and acts as if he owns people.

But there is one little fact that makes him especially insufferable...

He is a celebrity.

And now this playboy wants to add a couple of billions to his net worth by improving his public image...

...and I have to play the role of the obedient wife for the whole year.

I am ten years younger than him, infinitely poorer than him and frankly, he is out of my league.

But it doesn't mean that he can keep me locked in his manor and order me around!

He wants me to call him Sir and I have to admit that sometimes I want to.

And no matter how much I try to convince myself that our marriage is fake...

...I can't help but think of one simple question:

What if?

No cheating, no cliffhangers. HEA guaranteed! Can be read as a standalone.

**Total Pages (Source):** 72

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Amanda

Suddenly, it felt like the energy in the room changed. The voices, the music, and even the clinking of glasses somehow didn't fill the ballroom anymore. I followed the gazes of people around me and quickly discovered the source of the disturbance standing at the entrance.

Mr. Evan Jones, in the flesh.

I'd seen him on the internet before, of course. He was often discussed in the same circles as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. No matter what Evan got up to, it seemed like people were interested in it. Once, Evan was seen in a bodyboard shop in Miami. This led to a thirty-six-hour media frenzy wherein everyone speculated he was picking up boogie boarding. Boogie board sales skyrocketed.

The kind of man who generates that kind of interest is going to be surrounded by a nimbus of humanity at pretty much all times. Evan was the life and the death of the party. He brought the good times, but he drowned out all other business.

I didn't think people would be talking much about the rainforest now that he had arrived. I took a long look at him from afar and felt a little sigh escape me before I could stop it.

It was good that I had work to do instead of dreaming about disgustingly handsome and obscenely rich billionaires.

I noticed that the crab cakes were running low. I grabbed my radio and spoke into it.

“Vanessa, I need more crab cakes at the launching station. They’re going like crazy. And tell the kitchen staff to stop making the liver pate. No one is biting, and it’s starting to pile up.”

“Should I tell them to take the pate off?”

“Might as well. I think we need maintenance to do a sweep of the trash cans. They’re overflowing again.”

“I’m on it.”

I moved around the gala, putting out small fires and preventing larger ones. My staff were on task, though, and we’d planned for the high turnout. As the evening wore on, and fewer people availed themselves of the buffet, my job got a bit easier.

And yet it seemed that wherever I went people were either talking about Evan or talking to Evan. I often noticed him moving through the crowd and whenever Evan wanted personal space, people gave it to him without him having to ask.

His square jaw and dazzling blue eyes struck me from all the way across the room. Broad shoulders tapered down to a lean waist, all evidenced by his expertly tailored tuxedo. His smile seemed genuine and warm as he worked the room. It seemed like almost everyone wanted to come up and talk to him.

I kept thinking that his pictures on the internet did not do him justice. He was so much better looking in person. I kind of wanted to go up and talk to him myself, but I kept expecting some supermodel to walk up and attach herself to him. Not to mention all of the other people who kept taking up his attention.

I knew that someone like him probably wouldn't be interested in someone like me. Still, I couldn't help fantasizing about how it might feel to be his girlfriend. I could picture being whisked away to exotic locales and dining at five-star restaurants every night, but most of all I daydreamed about what it would feel like to have his arms around me.

Enough daydreaming, Amanda, back to work.

Looking around, I figured I did a pretty bang-up job of turning the Soho Ballroom at the Royal Garden hotel into the Amazon rainforest. I mean, I had a river and everything. The tables were set up around a counter with platters of food that floated on about six inches of water.

The tables themselves evoked the rainforest as well. Wooden plates with a highly glossed natural grain joined similarly natural flatware. The tablecloths bore a foliage pattern. I had thought about using faux jaguar hide, but that would have clashed with the conservation message of the charity the gala benefitted.

Saving the rainforest and having a fabulous time doing it. Not that it didn't take a ton of work, because it did.

Besides the tables, I'd had plenty of real potted trees brought in to add a fresh feel to the air. We had zookeepers with some of the more placid animals that the rainforest had to offer. Not that you could see much of the décor, what with the wall-to-wall rich people and all. Mingling next to the rich folks were a few celebrities. Like that guy who wears the eyepatch in those blockbuster superhero movies, the one with the vulgar catchphrase. He was there, along with that woman from the a capella movies who's about four foot eleven no matter what she says.

There were press there, too, including a ton of photographers snapping pictures of the event. I'd done a good job of seeding the press for a high turnout. The media loves a

feel-good story, and what's more feel-good than saving the rainforest?

The appearance of a billionaire celebrity, of course. It seemed like the photographers forgot all about the décor and the other guests and were waiting for Evan to talk with some woman so they could capture the moment for the morning tabloids.

Evan had a certain reputation. His past was littered with many different, very beautiful women. A great number of them had been celebrities. The rumors were he was a fantastic lover, but those were probably started by the tabloids to get more clicks on their articles. Still, it made me blush to think about what he might do to me with his big, sensual hands...

The eyepatch actor made a beeline for Evan. They greeted each other like old friends and then bellied up to the bar. It seemed like everyone wanted to get a piece of Evan's attention. I thought the bartender was going to faint when he smiled at her.

The milling throng of humanity around Evan rendered him temporarily invisible to my sight. I spent some time catching up on work matters. My team had things covered pretty well, though, so I didn't really do much but stand around, fuss, and try to pretend I wasn't still fantasizing about Evan.

Evan held the energy of the crowd in the palm of his hand, but I felt something else. A different kind of energy, subtle but just as potent. I turned to see Jennifer, the big cheese of the charity itself. She'd been pressing the flesh all night and working the room like a champ. I had no doubt their charity would have plenty of money in the coffers after the evening was over.

She was accompanied by her husband, Marshall. He wasn't quite as flashy as Evan, but he spent a lot of time in the tabloids as well due to his antics. No one expected him to settle down, but then Jennifer came along, and the rest was history.

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“There you are,” Jennifer said, approaching me and giving me a hug. “This has been an unmitigated success thanks to you, Mandy. You rock.”

“Can I get a hug too?” Jake appeared from the crowd and hugged me without waiting for my response. I still had no idea what exactly he was doing for the charity, but he was an old friend and I was always happy to see him. “Cool party, Amanda.”

“It’s mostly my staff. I just direct traffic and pop a lot of antacids,” I said with a laugh. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“Oh, I am indeed,” Jennifer said. “I want to pet the capybara again, but the line is pretty long.”

I took a sip from my bottled water to hide my embarrassment. I had totally used my sway as organizer to skip the line and pet the adorable capybara. The gigantic water mammal was in point of fact incredibly sweet and cuddly. It had nuzzled right up next to me almost like a cat.

“Jennifer, it’s your gala,” Marshall said. “You could just skip the line.”

“No, I can’t, don’t be silly,” she said, patting his belly. I melted a little bit at how adorable the two of them were together.

“Well, I’m worried about you being around that giant rat anyway, what with your condition and all.”

I perked up.

“Condition?”

“I’m pregnant,” Jennifer said, a smile of uncontained pride stretching across her lips.

“Oh, my goodness, congratulations,” I said, beaming with joy. I turned to Jake and smiled at him. “Did you hear that, Jake?”

“All right,” he said. “You should name it Jake.”

“Your name is already Jake, and why should I name my kid after you again?” Marshall said.

“Yeah, but it’s a good name, Jake. He can be Jake II.”

“What if it’s a girl?”

“Jakina, I guess.”

“I don’t think the feminine for Jake is Jakina. I think it’s Jane.”

They all laughed, and I sighed. My own family had been more of the dysfunctional variety. I mean, nobody grew up to be an ax murderer or a stripper or what have you, so I guess we weren’t that bad. Still, it was hard not to look at what my friends and employers had and not feel jealous.

Suddenly, the energy of the room changed again. I could kind of feel a general hush fall over the crowd and the photographers perked up. And their cameras seemed to be pointed in my direction. I felt a stab of self-conscious anxiety. Then I realized they weren’t looking at me at all.

I turned around to find that Evan was standing right by me. His presence rolled over

me like a breaking ocean wave. I was awash in his essence, and all of that animal magnetism created a heady mental perfume that had me feeling dizzy. His cupid's bow lips were aggressively sensual without seeming feminine. I could imagine them pressed up against my flesh, which sent goosebumps cascading over my skin. His eyes focused on me as Ramone gestured with familiarity.

"Here she is, as promised," Ramone said. Ramone was another old friend who worked for this charity.

Evan's eyes swept up and down my form. I had his attention at last, but I worried that I might melt into a puddle under that steadfast gaze.

"I'm Evan Jones. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Amanda Tate," I said, shaking his offered hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Ms. Tate is the event organizer for this little soirée. Everything that you see here, she had a direct hand in making happen."

Evan's eyes widened, and they now held a new note beyond the desire that had me dizzy—a droplet of respect. There's no aphrodisiac like sincere appreciation. If Evan wasn't sincere, he was faking it to Academy Award degrees. I really wanted to believe he wasn't faking it. I needed something real like that to give me a boost.

"Indeed?" He loaded so much into that word. I could almost read his mind.

Indeed, you're beautiful as well as competent. Indeed, I'm undressing you with my eyes right now. Indeed, I'm most interested in spending more time with you. Indeed...

I was so caught up in my fantasy, I almost missed the next thing he said.



## Page 3

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“You must be quite skilled at your job. I asked Ramone if I could meet the person responsible for all of this. I’ve been to so many of these galas, and this is the most organized and smoothly run of them all.”

I blushed red at his compliments.

“Thank you. It’s been a smooth night, and I have my staff to thank for that as much as anything that I have done.”

“Oh, you sell yourself short.” His eyes bored into me. I felt as if surely he was privy to my every lascivious thought about him. I tried to be casual, to play it cool, but I was burning up on the inside.

“The thing about success in business is,” he continued, “to surround yourself with the right people. All of the hard work, luck, and gumption in the world doesn’t matter as much as that does. Obviously, you’ve surrounded yourself with the right people, hence your success.”

“We wanted to make sure that this went off without a hitch,” Marshall said. “That’s why we asked Amanda to help us out and she did a marvelous job.”

“That is high praise coming from Marshall,” Evan said, his eyes shining with meaning. “Wouldn’t you agree, Ms. Tate?”

“Yes,” I said, “and you can call me Amanda if you want.”

“Very well, Amanda. That’s a lovely name.”

That only raised my temperature about a million degrees more.

His expression changed slightly.

“I might have need of your services at some point in the future,”he said, rather cryptically.

“Oh no,” Jennifer said. “You’re not going to steal away one of our best employees. Shame on you, Evan, no way are you going to take her away from us.”

Evan smiled ear to ear, and the inscrutable gaze he gave me made me shudder like a leaf in a strong breeze.

“We’ll just have to see about that, won’t we?”

## Chapter 2

Evan

“Mr. Jones.” A relatively young man stepped up to me and shoved his hand in my direction. “I’m Pete Dempsey, executive assistant director of accounting. It’s a pleasure to—”

“Mr. Dempsey, I know who you are. I hired you. I was the one who greenlit your promotion to this board. Something you need to learn about me yesterday is that I don’t like wasting my time with meaningless introductions.”

His jaw remained wide open, and he turned about three shades paler.

“I... was only trying to be—”

“You were trying to suck up, Mr. Dempsey. While it’s a time-honored tradition at many a firm and can lead to advancement, it will not avail you here. If you want to suck up to me, do your job better than anyone else in the world could do it. Then I’ll be impressed. Now sit down.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. Jenna, my assistant, hid a smile behind her hand. Even Edmond Fitz, the firm’s marketing director, kind of looked amused, and he was usually all business.

“All right, I’m here.” I sat down in my spot at the head of the table. “You can get started, Fitz.”

“Yes, sir.” He walked around to the front of the long table. The windows offered a gorgeous view, akin to Mount Olympus up in the clouds. Everything else fit my style and taste, a strict minimalist interpretation of the modern office meeting room. Black, white and stainless steel, no plants, no art. Nothing to distract people from the business at hand.

And the business at hand was always the same—making money.

Fitz went through his usual spiel. He was short, bald and overweight, but he was also damned good at his job. It was as if mother nature put everything it had into his brain and didn’t have much left for the rest of him. But when it came to reading the market and predicting its unstable course, Fitz was quite literally the man.

In short, profits were up and costs were down, which was good. But I could tell he was building up to something. Eventually, after about twenty minutes of relentlessly good news and cheer, I had to put a stop to it.

“Okay, Fitz. Just out with it already.”

He adjusted the horn-rim glasses on his nose and cleared his throat.

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“What do you mean, sir?”

“Come on, Fitz. Don’t sling bullshit with me. I was through with it before you knew what to do with it. Obviously, there’s something you don’t want to tell me, and you’re buttering me up with all of this fluffy good news. If I wanted to know our sales records or our fiscal growth aspects, I would look them up in the ample reports delivered to me daily. Now, tell me.”

Fitz flipped a few pages forward in his ledger.

“Okay, let’s cut to the chase here. The one thing holding this firm back is our CEO.”

I stared at him for a long moment while everyone in the room gasped. I wasn’t offended. I knew that Fitz would never dare to attack me. The little man just had a penchant for the dramatic and he was probably going somewhere with all of it.

“Simply put, Evan Jones is a great cult of personality and is good for our brand overall.” Fitz used the projecting screen to put up a slide he’d prepared. “But take a look at this. Tesla lost stock value after Elon Musk broke up with his wife. Jeff Bezos had an affair and his empire took a hit.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend to break up with, Fitz, so relax. I’m not going to tank our stock.”

Chuckles went around the table, but only Jenna’s was sincere. The rest of them were trying to suck up to me.

“This isn’t about you tanking our stock. It’s about you taking it to an even higher value.”

I did something I rarely do. I rubbed the bridge of my nose and sighed. Normally, I see such things as a sign of weakness. That should tell you how exasperated I truly was.

“Fitz, you had better be going somewhere with this.”

He adjusted his glasses and went at it. He had facts and figures to back him up. At first, I was incredulous, but he sort of started winning me over by the end. I checked Jenna’s facial expression, because she’s a great judge of whether something is bullshit or not, as well as a mathematical whiz.

When I noticed that she seemed hooked on the presentation, it made me all the more intrigued.

“...and so,” Fitz said, wrapping up “Our prediction is that by entering a public relationship you will increase your name brand and personal recognition factor by seventy percent, with a correlational increase in stock value. And if we make it controversial, as I outlined in subsection C of my presentation, then the most modest estimates are one hundred and fifty percent.”

He closed up his pointer and stood there with his hands in his pockets as casually as he could. I knew he was as smug as the catwho ate the canary on the inside, though.

I turned to Jenna.

“Jenna, calculate what this alleged increased stock price will do for my net worth.”

“You’ve got it, boss,” she said, unfolding her ever-present laptop and setting into

work. “You want the seventy percent or the controversial one hundred and fifty percent.”

“Indulge me and give me the figures for both.”

She went to work, typing like a fiend and crunching numbers in her head and on the screen.

I turned back to face Fitz.

“All right, Fitz. All those facts and figures and numbers?”

He nodded.

“I want you to transform and compact all of that into a five-minute pitch. Go.”

His eyes widened. Fitz stammered for a few seconds before he took off his glasses and started to speak.

“Mr. Jones, you are very well known through both your business ventures and your carefully curated public life. Both of these aspects contribute to your net worth and give you the power to ruin your competition or start a new venture.”

It was true. Once, I happened to stop at a chain coffee shop because it was conveniently located across the street from the business I was about to purchase. After being pleasantly surprised by the service and the product I received, I wanted to give a shout-out to the hard workers at that location.

My intention was to help them get some recognition and earn some goodwill with their company. The public seized upon my tweet as ‘proof’ I was about to purchase said coffee shop chain.

The stock prices doubled, then quadrupled. I decided not to comment until a reporter finally asked me point-blank if I was buying the company. I said no. The baristas I'd tried to help wound up getting in trouble when the stock tanked.

“However,” Fitz continued, “we’ve reached the accretion point where the shotgun blast of publicity is no longer generating growth. And without growth, if we’re not generating it on a regular basis, well, there’s no gain to your net worth, either.”



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“And my reputation as a brilliant businessman doesn’t help?”

“It helps to maintain our position, but not to enhance it.”

“Wait, Fitz. When I started this whole public persona shindig, you assured me it would lead to an increase in my net worth.”

“And it did.” He adjusted his glasses. “It did, and now I’m telling you that it’s plateaued.”

“And why is it plateauing? That would be my next question.”

“Well, sir...” he cleared his throat and adjusted his bow tie. “It would seem that you have a certain reputation.”

“What reputation would that be? For being rich?”

“Being rich is fine. Being rich is cool these days. Keeping up with the Kardashians and all of that jazz.” His lips formed an inverted U. “It’s not your reputation for being rich that’s the problem. It’s the fact that you’re known for being a ruthless master manipulator, and, um... what the press likes to dub as ‘billionaire playboy.’”

“Billionaire Playboy, huh?”

Jenna looked up from her computer for the briefest of moments.

“It’s a deserved reputation, sir.”

“I never said that it wasn’t, Jenna.” I turned back to Fritz. “Please, continue.”

He swallowed hard and looked rather uncomfortable.

“Well, sir... and I’m just reporting the results of our research, you understand, I’m not judging or even presenting my own personal opinion...”

“Just spit it out, Fritz. Stop trying to protect my feelings because I don’t have any.”

He closed his mouth, swallowed one more time, and continued.

“Quite frankly, we need to try and humanize you, sir. Your public persona is perceived as being icy, manipulative, and ruthless. Not to mention your blatant disregard for the conventions of marriage and relationships.”

“I don’t know why you were so afraid to tell me that, Fritz.”

“Sir?” he said anxiously.

“Since when have I ever gotten angry with you for telling me the truth? In fact, I demand that you tell me the truth. It’s one of the reasons you’re in the position you’re in.”

I let a rare smile blossom over my face.

“Everything you said was true, Fritz. I am cold-blooded and calculating. I don’t believe in traditional marriage or relationships in general. All of this is what has made me into the success that I am today, and I’m not going to pretend otherwise.”

“You don’t have to pretend otherwise, sir.” Fritz sighed. “Well, okay, you are going to have to pretend otherwise on some of it. But you can continue to be a calculating

and ruthless businessman so long as you show some sign of humanity.”

“And you think that my having a girlfriend is going to be a sign of humanity to the masses?”

He nodded.

“Yes, exactly. A fake public relationship is perfect for you. You won’t even have to pretend too much. Just show up with her on your arm, dine in fancy restaurants, take her on a shopping spree or two, and the press will do the rest of the work for us. Just the perception that you are in a relationship is going to work wonders.”

“And when I take her out, what am I supposed to do if the paparazzi come up with a flashbulb and a microphone in my face?”

“Just let her do the talking. You stay you, the Iceman, Mr. Stoic. All the masses will think that you’re just cold on the outside, and that there must be a gooey center of humanity, some soft spot, on the inside.”

“So, I take her out once in a while, and let her do all the talking. I think I can get behind this plan. It sounds like a minimal disruption to my life.”

Jenna looked up from her computer, her eyes shining. I knew it had to be good.

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“Sir, I’m finished with my calculations.”

I turned to her.

“Lay it on me, Jenna.”

“If we go through with Fritz’s plan on the most basic level, you’re looking at an increase to your net worth of four billion.”

My brows climbed high on my face. That wasn’t a number to sneeze at, even for me. It would be a roughly one-fifth increase in my net worth.

“That sounds almost too good to be true, Jenna.”

“I thought so too. I crushed the numbers three times and got the same result. Would you like to hear the aggressive, controversial model’s predictions?”

“Yes,” I said, my heart beating faster. I felt a heady rush, anticipating the next words to tumble out of her mouth.

“On a conservative estimate, you’re looking at an increase of eight billion to your net worth.”

Almost a third. That was too tempting to ignore.

“All right.” I turned to Fritz and encompassed him in my gaze as well. “Let’s say, hypothetically, we pull the trigger. How do we maximize this?”

“Controversy,” Jenna said. “Controversy Creates Cash.”

It was one of her favorite mantras. Lately, Fritz had picked it up as well.

“I concur with Jenna, sir,” Fritz said. “The best way would be to generate controversy, with drama, romance, passion, all of that good stuff.”

“Hmm. Okay, Cecil B. DeMille, what’s your endgame?”

“A sudden marriage right out of the blue.”

“What?” I sputtered. A fake relationship was one thing, but that suggestion had me reeling.

“A fake marriage, of course. Think about the headlines. Ruthless playboy—tamed and turned into a loving husband to everyone’s sheer, utter shock.”

He wound down, and then quickly composed himself.

“Of course, that’s not acceptable to you, sir. So perhaps—”

“No.”

He closed his mouth again, but his eyes opened wider than ever.

“Sir?”

“Let’s do it. Let’s do the marriage. I never do things halfway. I made my fortune by going all the way. I’m all in on this.”

Fritz and Jenna started talking all at once.

“We need to create a list of celebrities suitable—”

“We’ll have to vet every one of those candidates, Fritz. How would we—”

“What if we did an old flame? A second chance romance kind of thing?”

“No, too sweet and Hallmark channel for Evan. No one would buy it. It has to be a sudden storm of love.”

“Jenna, what does that even mean?”

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“I don’t know, but I’m trademarking it.”

“Yeah, you go ahead and trademark that, but for as long as I am head of marketing...”

I tried to interject, but I don’t think either of them heard me. They were on a roll. I decided it was best just to treat this event like a natural disaster, similar to a tsunami. I would just sit back and wait for it to be over.

In the end, Fritz brought up a point that Jenna concurred was quite important.

“Sir, we need to make sure that, rather than celebrity, we select a woman based on her likelihood of accepting the contract stipulations.”

“Fritz is right, sir,” Jenna added.

I grunted and leaned back in my chair.

“No need to consider that aspect, Fritz.”

“Why not?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Because women always do what I want.”

## Chapter 3

Amanda

“What do you mean, his limo is even better than ours?”

Jennifer gasped on the other end of the call.

The white leather interior of the limo looked great with all the solid gold panels, especially with the majestic sunset reflected in all of its glory. The golden panels had been polished to such a mirror-like sheen that I could see myself in them, hair down and sheathed into a pencil skirt. The woman in the reflection held a phone up to her ear as well.

“I mean just what I say I mean. Of course, Marshall and you have different priorities now than having the biggest and the best of everything. Evan Jones is still in that headspace, so it should come as no surprise that his limo is even more majestic than yours.”

I looked at the opulence surrounding me and shook my head. I mean, there was a mini fridge, a fully stocked bar, a smart television and a desktop built into the center console. It just didn’t get better than all of that, as far as I was concerned.

I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d even made love to some gorgeous starlet in the back seat, where I was riding.

“I sure wish I knew why Evan Jones wanted to talk to me,” I said.

“Well, didn’t he say it was for business?”

“Yeah, but what kind of business?”

“What if he wants me to organize an event for him or something?”

“Then go ahead and do it.”



“Are you sure? I don’t want to betray the charity.”

“Stop saying that, for heaven’s sake. It would be great publicity, so go ahead and do it if you want. We never said you had to work only for us, you know.”

“I know, but you guys keep me pretty busy as it is.”

“We’ll muddle through without you somehow. Besides, think of it this way. Even if things don’t work out on the business end, at least you’ll get to spend an evening with an H-oh-double-T guy.”

“I can’t tell if you’re trying to tell me to be modest or trying to pimp me out for publicity.”

“Ouch,” Jennifer said. “You know I would never do that to you. I don’t want you to think of this as encouragement or discouragement of what you may or may not do when you’re alone with one of the most eligible bachelors on the planet.”

“Jennifer, behave.”

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“This is me behaving. Did you think my child was an immaculate conception or something?”

We both laughed.

“Oh, stop. I’m strictly business tonight, I swear.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

I said that, but the truth was I couldn’t forget the impression that Evan had made on me when we met. His touch, the butterflies I felt in my stomach... It was all as real as could be.

Of course, I felt that way for him. He was basically Superman, right? And I wasn’t even Lois Lane. I was more like a mail clerk at the Daily Planet. I was good at my job, sure, but so were a lot of other people.

I’d seen some of Evan’s hookups. Quite frankly, they were nothing short of phenomenally beautiful. What would a man who could have all of that want with plain old me?

I looked out the window and frowned. I’d left the city behind entirely. I was starting to wonder if something weird was going on. Like maybe somebody was playing a prank. The limo was going to drop me off at a dairy farm or something like that. Ha-ha, everyone has a good laugh at Amanda’s expense.

The rolling hills gave way to flatter terrain. The limo slowed down and turned off

onto a blacktop two-lane road, then passed through a security gate and kept going. What, did Evan have a secret compound out in the woods or something?

Then the limo came around a bend in the road, and the tree line retreated. I spotted a squarish aircraft control tower, and a full-sized tarmac and runway. A private airfield? I noticed that every aircraft had Evan's company logo on it.

My first thought was he must have been a very busy guy. He obviously had to jump on a plane and go somewhere important, so he trucked me out to meet him for what would probably be like a ten-minute meeting.

Imagine my surprise when the limo pulled inside of one of the hangars. The private jet in the hangar had a sleek, tapered look, almost like a spaceship instead of an airplane. Its chrome hull reflected the limo driver as he hastened to open my door.

The door opened and he offered me a hand. I took it, and he lifted me to my feet. Then he gestured toward the aircraft, which had its stairs deployed.

I assumed I was supposed to climb the steps and board the plane. It had me rather confused. Evan must have been really, really busy.

I stepped into the plane and felt like I was in the lap of luxury. Instead of a utilitarian cabin, the interior looked like a finely designed hotel room, and a damn ritzy one at that. If I thought the limo was fancy, the private jet took the cake.

"Ah, you've made it. That makes me very happy."

I turned around to see Evan. He'd poured his powerful body into an expertly tailored suit. His charcoal blazer and trousers showed off the lines of his torso, and his white silk shirt was unbuttoned just enough to see the top of the curve of his pecs.

Those gorgeous eyes of his hypnotized me, taking my breath away. He shook my hand, and the touch was electric. All of the old feelings came back.

“Mr. Jones. Nice to meet you again.”

I had a slight tremble in my voice.

“Oh please, call me Evan. I hope that we’re going to be working very closely with each other.”

He gestured to comfortable-looking seats. I settled in, assuming he would take the one opposite the other side of a mahogany table built into the cabin wall. Instead, he sat down right beside me.

“Why are we meeting on a plane?” I asked. As if on cue, the private jet lurched as it surged forward. I looked out the window to see the trees moving by in an increasingly rapid blur.

“Is this plane taking off?” I sputtered.

“Yes, it is.”

I glared at him. “This amounts to kidnapping.”

He just eyed me coldly.

“Don’t be so dramatic. I didn’t have the time to meet you, and this was the most convenient for me.”

“What about me?”

“Don’t worry. Once I get where I’m going, the plane will take you right back here. You’ll be home safe and sound in time for dinner, I assure you.”

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I leaned back in my seat, biting my tongue on a nasty retort. I reminded myself the charity could use this guy's endorsement. That didn't mean I was okay with what was happening to me. Not by a long shot.

His inscrutable gaze was so sharp it cut me. He seemed to realize that I was uncomfortable.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"Yes, some water would be nice."

He turned about and opened a panel, revealing a mini fridge full of bottled water. He took one of them out and handed it over to me. It was such an expensive brand I didn't even recognize its label. I wondered how much it cost. The language on the back was not English, so I wasn't sure about the particulars.

I did know that the water hit a lot differently than normal. I didn't get that bloated feeling after drinking it.

"It's good water, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's fine, thank you."

"It's magnetized and PH balanced."

"I assume that makes it good."

My tone was a bit snippy. He looked at me for a long moment and then reached over to the control panel.

“Perhaps this will make you a bit more relaxed.”

He pushed a button, and suddenly the cabin started moving. Not literally, I realized. The floor remained fixed in place. The ceiling and walls, however, retreated to reveal a clear fuselage. I could see the spectacular sunset with its red golds, purples, and trailing pink staining the horizon with a panoramic view. The entire sky lit up with color, the white clouds bearing a glowing red gold aura.

My jaw gaped open. I’d never seen anything like it. It was almost like flying through the air without any mechanical means at all. I assumed it was as close to pure flight as a human was likely to get.

I felt like I had to say something. I tried to regain some of my dignity with a joke.

“Does Wonder Woman know you stole her invisible jet?” I asked.

He chuckled obligingly, but it was obvious to anyone that I was dumbstruck.

“These jets are still in the prototype phase. I, however, was able to get a fast track onto the first beta test.”

“Beta test, huh? So, we’re going to fall apart in mid-flight?”

He shook his head.

“Not hardly. I would never take this ship into the air if it weren’t perfectly safe.”

I gaped at how gorgeous it was to see a sunset at that height. I was used to sunset

being more or less one-dimensional. Like, I looked up into the sky in a certain direction and there it was.

But at forty thousand feet, the sunset took on new dimensions. It painted the clouds below, above, all around us. The sky seemed a brilliant hue of blue-gold, and it calmed my soul just to see it. I had to admit, I didn't feel like complaining about the impromptu plane ride any longer.

I supposed it might have seemed pretty normal to a billionaire playboy like Evan to just take an interviewee for a ride in his jet. Sort of like taking a ride in a car to him.

"You still seem rather tense, Amanda."

"I guess I am. It's not every day that you share space with the legendary Evan Jones."

"Legendary is what they call you when you're dead. I'm very much alive."

Yeah, he was. And gorgeous to boot. I allowed myself to fall into the brilliant pools of his eyes and never felt like climbing backout.

"Does your neck hurt?"

I hadn't realized I was rubbing it.



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“There’s this one spot that’s been tight lately. I really need to stop skipping my morning yoga—hello, what are you doing?”

He stood up and walked behind my chair, then put his hands on my shoulders. I started to tell him to stop, but his fingers were like magic. The tension and pain in my neck had been constant for some time. He worked the muscles into limp submission, and the tightness just drained away.

“You’re so tense,” he said, going to work on another tight knot of muscle. “You work yourself so very hard.”

“I have to. It’s a demanding profession.” I resisted the urge to let my head loll. His touch felt so good, in more ways than one. “That feels so nice.”

“Relax,” he said, gently shaking my shoulders. “Just relax.”

I did my best to obey. He returned to massaging my shoulders, and I did let my head loll, my eyes squeezing shut. I let out a sharp gasp of pain that turned into a satisfied moan of relief.

“That’s it,” he purred. “Just let me take care of you, beautiful.”

Take care of me? I knew where it was going, and I had no intention of resisting temptation this time.

Amanda

Evan's hands worked their way over to the rounded edge of my shoulders, taking my blazer along for the ride. The wool garment slid off my body, baring my neck. Air tickled my exposed skin until he moved his head and blocked the vent. The wash of air from the vent wafted his scent into my nostrils. He smelled so good.

Alarms rang in my head. Are you sure you want to be doing this? Of course I was sure I wanted it. The real question was, did I want to deal with the fallout? Win, lose, or draw, this was going to seriously complicate my life.

At the moment, though, it didn't seem to matter. Not as much as the fiery pulses of delight triggered by Evan's nimble fingertips. I shivered as his hot breath hit the nape of my neck. His lips settled onto my skin and a gasp forced its way from my mouth.

"Amanda..."

He had a way of saying my name, as if his tongue caressed every syllable. Evan pronounced it like a one-word poem, a sacred incantation.

Evan's hands moved the shoulder straps of my cami down and away. He peeled the fabric off of my breasts. I moaned as he kissed and suckled on my neck. Amazing sensations flowed through every nerve, pushing me into a higher state of arousal.

One hand moved around to the back. My bra came undone almost immediately. His smoothness at the task should have been alarming, I supposed. I mean, no one was that adept without a ton of practice. But in the heat of the moment, it just made me feel like I was being taken care of.

And besides, it's best to take your engine to an experienced mechanic when it's time to be serviced. And I could already tell Evan was an expert-level mechanic.

It wasn't just the things he did to me; it was the way he did them. The way he seemed to savor every stroke of his fingers, every lick of his tongue, every deep inhale with his face buried in my hair. He seemed intent on absorbing every sensual aspect of my being.

My breasts came free as he peeled the demi bra off. It fell down onto my lap, then slid on the floor. Part of my mind thought I should pick it up—it was an expensive, very supportive bra with no underwire—but then he cupped my breasts in his big, powerful hands. He lifted them up, freeing me from the weight of the world. A sigh one part relief two parts wantonness hissed from my mouth.

"I've thought of nothing but making love to you since we met," he whispered in my ear right before he gently bit the lobe. I cried out, a deep pang throbbing through my pussy.

"I thought this was about business," I said in a sharp gasp. My voice sounded to me as if it came from far away for some reason.

"It was supposed to be, but you've got a hold on me." His fingers swept up and caressed my nipples with long, slow strokes. "I just can't help myself."

The seat was a barrier between us. Suddenly it seemed like too much. I wanted to feel his body against my own. I started to rise, to go to him and hold him in my arms like I ached to. Instead, he firmly pushed me back into the seat.

"I'm not done taking care of you yet," he purred into my ear. I laughed, a giddy warmth going through my body.

"I want to feel you," I groaned. It was as articulate as I could get, with the heady rushes of pleasure elicited by his every touch ruling my senses.

“In good time, you’ll get to feel... everything.”

I gasped as he kissed my neck again, just the way I liked best. His grunts and growls of hungry delight pushed me along toward the edge of a climax just as much as his fiery touches and smoldering kisses. One of his hands slid down to the waistband of my skirt.

With expert aplomb, he hiked up the front of my skirt from my knees to my waist with just one hand. Again, I got the feeling he’d done this a lot. And now he was doing it with me.

The kinds of thoughts that went through my head were insipid. I had my head thrown back, so I was looking through the clear roof of the cabin at the sunset-tinged clouds. I should have been thinking of something poetic or majestic to match the phenomenal view.

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Instead, I just kept thinking I should have worn sexier underwear. My plain white satin panties were comfy, but not something a sexy woman in a movie would wear.

If he cared, he didn't say anything. Evan's fingers traced through the groove of my pussy, separated from my skin only by the satin panties. My hips moved of their own accord as I thrust myself against him.

"Oh, do you like that?" His voice was a velvety soft whisper, caressing my ears and tickling my brain with delight.

"Yes," I cried sharply as he continued to toy with my pussy through the panties.

He hooked the fingers of one hand into the hemline of the panties and tugged the fabric to the side. I bit down on my bottom lip and felt a rush of shame, my cheeks turning purple with it. He could see how my body was so ready for him, so wide open and dripping wet.

"Your pussy is even cuter than I thought it would be," he rumbled. "In fact, it's the cutest pussy I've ever seen."

I stared up at the stratosphere as we sailed through the heavens. Literally and figuratively. Evan gently stroked his finger along my swollen outer labia, getting his fingers wet with my juices. Slowly, he rubbed me from the base of my clit down to the pink trench between my wide-open pussy lips.

Evan's explorations felt amazing. He let out grunts of awe and delight as he opened my petals and divulged so many of my secrets.

“You have a very responsive pussy, Amanda,” he whispered. His face hovered inches from where his fingers played.

“Not usually,” I gasped, and it was the truth. I’ve had a couple of guys try to pleasure me with their hands or even their mouths and they just fumbled around so much it killed the mood.

Evan played me like an instrument and let me know that there were things I liked I hadn’t even thought of. His fingers slipped inside of me, causing my mouth to fly open. A second later, I let out a high-pitched cry as he latched onto my left pussy lip and suckled like a greedy calf.

My hands went to the back of his head on instinct. His hair felt so good, so luxurious in my fingers. The sexy grunts and growls he issued into my skin let me know just how much fun he was having giving me pleasure.

I could say Evan was a ruthless businessman and master manipulator. I could not say he was a selfish lover. Not by any stretch of the imagination. He hadn’t even tried to extort a promise of reciprocation before going down on me. He did it because he wanted to.

Because he knew doing it would get me off.

I twisted and writhed under his tongue. I was grateful for the engine’s background hum to drown out my sharp cries and deep moans. No one would possibly mistake what we were doing backthere if they could hear.

I glanced off to the side, through the clear cabin wall, and spotted another plane in the distance. The thought that I was exposed to them was downright silly, considering the distance, but the lack of opaque walls made it feel that way.

He tugged his head backward, stretching my pussy lip out in the most delightful way. He let it slip from his mouth, and then dove after the one on the opposite side. All the while, he worked his fingers in gently, moving them about in slow, sensual circles. I think he had three in me at that point. My body just opened up and welcomed him inside.

Evan moved his mouth upward, extending his tongue and licking my clitoris, mound and all, with thorough firmness. My mouth flew open with a long, guttural moan. Pleasure throbbed through me. I was so close to orgasm.

So fucking close I almost couldn't stand it.

He licked me again, nudging me up and along, but not over the edge. Evan slowed his pace, both his fingers and his tongue. Every lick pushed me right up to the brink of coming hard, but then he would move away, and I would settle down just enough that the next lick wouldn't suffice.

"Oh god," I cried. "Oh god, please."

It was all I could form the words to say. Evan latched onto my clitoris with his lips. I sucked in a rasping, ragged gasp of air as he suckled intensely. The next moment I let it out as I crashed, stampeded, and trampled over the precipice of orgasm. I came hard. All of that teasing built me up like Mount Saint Helens.

Contractions seized my body as pulse after pulse of pleasure flooded my system. I stared up at the sun-dappled clouds in the sky and felt as if my soul dwelt there among them. For a moment I felt connected to everything, most of all Evan.

He lifted his face from my crotch, dripping wet with my juices. Evan rose to his feet and pulled his shirt off. I gaped at the sight of his chest. He looked like a professional athlete, rippling with chiseled muscle. His broad shoulders tapered down to a leanly

muscled waist. Then he stripped off his pants, and between the pillars of his thighs I saw the bulge in his silk underwear.

Evan was so caring, so nurturing that I couldn't reconcile it with his ruthless public persona. I couldn't believe that anyone who could make me feel that amazing and be that selfless while he was doing it could be a ruthless bastard. His eyes made me want to melt; they weren't cold at all.

I reached up and pulled his underwear down. He laughed and petted the back of my head as I stripped him. I stared at his shaven cock, and it was magnificent all right. Not practical-joke big, butdamn. A thick vein curled around the edge of his shaft, throbbing with the beating of his heart.

Evan lifted me to my feet, then tugged the hem of my cami top. I lifted my arms over my head so he could take it off of me. He mashed his lips against my own the second the cami hit the floor. I moaned softly into his mouth, and I realized it was our first kiss.

He was a hell of a kisser. Not darting his tongue in and out like a lizard or anything. He tasted damn good and took charge. Only he didn't take charge so he could get what he wanted. He did it to givemewhat I wanted. I surrendered to his sensual embrace, basking in the glow of his intense desire.

I slipped out of my panties and shimmied out of the skirt as he came up for air. His hand caressed my cheek. Evan's gaze emanated heat on a lot of levels as he took in the sight of my fully nude body.

Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and spun me around to face away from him. Evan pushed me forward until my hands slapped on the tabletop. He moved up behind me, soft palms accessing the curve of my hips. I sighed, staring up into the sunset sky through the see-through cabin panels.



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I swiveled my hips, trying to entice him to give me what we both wanted. It worked like a charm. He dragged his shaft through the groove of my dripping wet pussy. My mouth flew open in a long cry as he slid the crown of his cock between my swollen, dripping wet pussy lips.

Inch by inch, he slid inside of me. My eyes squeezed shut against the natural splendor, because I was riding the waves of intense pleasure just from being penetrated by him. I shivered with a climax even before he slid in all the way.

His cock slid in until his balls slapped against my flesh. A sharp pinch heralded a wave of bliss throbbing through my body.

“I feel so full,” I gasped. “Oh god, Evan. Oh god, it feels so good.”

“Your pussy feels perfect around my cock,” he hissed through clenched teeth. I could feel him trembling against me, inside of me. He was fighting the urge to come. I made it hard for him, literally, as I ground my ass against him, pumping my hips like a piston.

He took the bait and thrust into me. I cried out, my hands gripping the sides of the table as a wave of pleasure flowed over and through me. I opened my eyes and saw the purple-streaked sky near the setting sun. It perfectly encapsulated what I felt in that moment.

Evan thrust into me, his own cries of delight filling the air, mingling with my moans and sighs. I opened my eyes as he pushed me right over the edge of climax. I came harder than before, my nails raking lines in the enameled tabletop as I screamed, my

throat raw.

He came inside of me, grunting and straining his taut body against my own. I felt his cock throbbing inside of me as he emptied out. He pulled me up into his embrace, kissing the back of my neck and wrapping his arms around my waist.

I whimpered with disappointment as his cock slid out of me. He smiled and then pulled me down to the cabin floor. He laid me on the transparent surface and then knelt between my thighs.

“I want you so bad, Amanda,” he whispered.

I let out a soft cry as he slid inside of me. My pussy contracted, as if trying to draw him further inside of me. It felt like we were just streaking through the sky, no plane, no pilot, no limits, making love like a pair of ancient Greek gods.

He collapsed on top of me, our sweat mingling as it cooled. I held onto him in my embrace as we cuddled together on the floor of the plane. I couldn't believe that I was with Evan Jones. He was so out of my league that he might as well have been standing on the moon. But he was there with me, in the now.

“So,” I said dreamily. “What business did you have to discuss?”

“I want you to plan my wedding.”

## Chapter 5

Amanda

“What an asshole,” Ramone said with a sneer as he set down his drink.

The bar was half-empty, but our little group still caught some stares from the neighboring tables.

Rinaldo's was well known to hipsters for its multicultural cuisine, but even more so for its retro kitsch vibe. It squatted on a corner lot in a stylishly dilapidated building that, but for the signage, could have looked perfectly at home with some 1930s gumshoe trudging up the steps to his office.

The interior was something like a cross between a gypsy wagon and the inside of the house of that weird hippie lady who's always cooking tofu and brown rice in your neighborhood. The light fixtures were wagon wheels from the old west, and not repainted or anything. Most of the paint had faded or chipped, and the axle bore a coat of rust.

Industrial light bulbs shone at the end of each of the wagon wheel's spokes. The light they cast sort of had a slight 'shake' to it as the filaments inside glowed and pulsed with energy. I found it to be distracting when we first sat down, but soon I was getting used to it.

"What an asshole," Ramone repeated himself. "I mean, making you get on an airplane for a job interview? Then you had to, what, fly the whole way back all by yourself?"

"I concur," Jake said between sips from his light beer. I noticed he'd already used his thumbnail to scrape off most of the paper label. They lay in slightly curled piles on the highly polished table. "How important does this guy think he is?"

Even though part of me wanted to agree with them, it kind of bothered me to hear them talk about Evan like that.

"The thing is, he is that important. I mean, he had to be on location to sign original

documents and meet with a county official. It wasn't something that could have waited, and he really did want to retain my services."

"I hope he paid you extra for the time you wasted in the plane ride."

"As a matter of fact, he did." I gave Jake the stink eye. "He treated it as a consultation and paid me two thousand dollars for my trouble."

"Two thousand is a good chunk of change," Ramone said. "Still kind of seems like a jerk to me, though."

"The fact of the matter is the plane ride back actually gave me some time to work on planning the fake wedding."

Ramone sniffed; his face etched with derision.

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“Sounds like a bunch of bullshit to me. I mean, it’s got to be bad karma to try and make up a fake wedding for publicity, right?”

Obviously, I hadn’t told them about my having sex with Evan on the plane ride to his meeting.

“Lots of people do the fake wedding thing. Do you really think that Kanye West and Kim Kardashian married each other for love?”

Jake shook his head and took a lingering sip of his beer, pointedly not looking at me. I gave him a glare.

“Something you want to say to me, Jake?”

“Just that you sound rather cynical about this whole love thing, that’s all.”

I rolled my eyes.

“It’s not called being cynical, Jake. It’s called being a realist. I am a realist, whereas you are an optimist who sees everything through rose-colored glasses.”

I sounded a little bitter, even to my own ears. I guess it had to do with Evan’s change in attitude after we had sex on the plane. He’d been so loving, so intensely passionate and into me during the sex. And then, he’d turned into a cold-blooded businessman again.

I mean, he hadn’t texted me or anything since, except to inquire about practical things

about my plans for his fake wedding.

“Still, won’t people be mad if it turns out he had a fake wedding?” Ramone shook his head. “It just seems like you’re inviting disaster into your life if you take this job on.”

“You’re being overdramatic, Ramone.” Jennifer sipped on her—virgin—mimosa and frowned at him. “No one’s likely to find out. Not with NDAs floating around, making everyone tight-lipped out of legal necessity.”

Jennifer looked over at me.

“Don’t listen to him, Amanda. There are many, many things more unethical than a fake wedding. You have to ask yourself, who’s really being hurt?”

Jake opened his mouth to object, then closed it. I saw the wheels turning in his gaze. Then he looked up hopefully.

“What if one of the people in the fake wedding catches feels?”

“Feels?” Ramone looked worried. “Is that some kind of new social disease or something? Should I be investing in condom manufacturers?”

“Feels, man,” Jake said, running a hand down his face. “Haven’t you ever heard the phrase ‘catching feels’ before?”

“Jake means, what if one of the people in the fake wedding winds up falling in love for real.” I gave Jake a look. “Is that what you’re driving at, big man?”

Jake nodded sagely.

“Well, while I agree that you have a point, more or less...” I took a long sip of my

appletini. "...the fact of the matter is, it's not my problem if one of them falls in love. Evan's not going to anyway, and I'm sure that whatever supermodel or movie starlet he entices into his scheme will be going in with her eyes wide open."

"Getting back to my original point," Jennifer said wryly, "before I was so rudely interrupted. It seems to me that no one is really going to get hurt, except maybe the participants, and that's their fault for participating in the fake wedding in the first place."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Frankly, I don't see the harm in it. It's a nice distraction for people."

"Not to mention that at the wedding ceremony, I've gotten Evan to agree to make a speech about the rainforest. Plus, I'm going to have a lot of Amazon themes to help drive the point home and gain more publicity for the charity. I'm totally down with this plan, guys. Like Jennifer said, nobody's going to get hurt."

"So," Ramone said, "how does one go about planning a fake wedding?"

"The same way one plans a real wedding, I guess." I shrugged. "I mean, that's how I'm handling it. You'll still have to get all the usual trappings. A venue, flowers, tablescape, a caterer, so on and so forth."

My brow scrunched up with worry.

"Of course, right now there's only so much I can do in terms of planning."

"Why is that?" Jake asked, finally scraping the last bit of label off of his beer.

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“Well, it’s quite simple, really. One of the key facets of planning a wedding is this—who are you planning it for? What are their tastes, their desires, what makes them open their mouth and gasp with awe and pleasure? What gets them excited? What turns them on?”

I wound down and noticed all three of them looking at me with mischievous grins on their faces.

“I’m starting to sound awfully sexual about all of this, aren’t I?”

“Yup,” Jake said.

“Just a little,” Ramone agreed.

I supposed it was my need to confess my sexcapade to someone coming out on a conscious level. That, or I just had an inherently dirty mind.

“Well, the main thing to take away from all of this is, our charity will have a huge surge in publicity thanks to the world-famous Evan Jones using his magnetism and charisma to draw eyes our way.”

Jake and Ramone kind of nodded, as if they agreed.

I took in everyone with my gaze.

“It’s time for us to start strategizing on how to maximize Evan’s popularity for our cause. Ramone, Jake, are you with me? I need you to bring your best ideas forward



for this.”

Jake nodded, and then he had a light of realization dawn in his eyes.

“Ooh, ooh, I’ve got it. Whichever one of us…”

He gestured between himself and Ramone.

“...comes up with the best strategy for maximizing Evan’s popularity for the cause will be the one that Jennifer will name the baby after.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Ramone said, “which is something you’ve never had in your life before.”

Ramone stared at Jennifer’s belly.

“You hear that in there, little guy? Your name is going to be Ramone. And everyone in the world will look at you and know that there goes a real ladies’ man.”

“Can you not talk about things like that to Jen’s unborn baby?” I said with a scowl.

“It’s not like little Ramone understands what I’m saying yet.”

“I understand,” I grumbled, but Jennifer didn’t seem to mind.

She cast her gaze at both of them, and then subtly moved it over toward me.

“Jake, Ramone, I think the two of us need some girl time. Could you give us a minute?”

“That depends,” Ramone said cryptically. “Do you mind taking the check?”

Jake laughed.

“Zing!”

The two of them high-fived, and I began to question my existence, that I had these people for friends.

“Of course I’ll get the check,” she said dryly. “Marshall and I own this restaurant. Now scram, you two. Go find somewhere else to share your pearls of wisdom.”

The two of them stood up and headed for the door, arguing the whole way.

“You know that the best way to use Evan is going to be talking about his boogie boarding, right? Like he could boogie board down the Amazon,” Jake said.

“Are you an idiot? You need an ocean to boogie board,” Ramone replied.

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“You’re not considering how we can use his washboard abs to draw attention to our cause.”

“And you’re not considering that there are no waves on the Amazon.”

They vanished out the door, and I turned back to Jennifer.

“Alone at last, eh? I hope you’re not about to tell me we have to fire those two.”

She scoffed and dismissed my concerns with a wave.

“Oh, those two have been with us since forever. I would never fire them. I am seriously considering naming my children after them, for heaven’s sake.”

I laughed, feeling a little bit better.

“What I wanted to talk to you about is, what’s eating you?” She reached across the table and took my hand. “I mean, ever since you got back from that plane ride, you’ve been kind of different.”

I heaved a long sigh and decided to take the plunge and tell Jennifer everything.

“I may have, um...” My throat suddenly felt dry. I took a sip of my drink and continued. “I may have slept with Evan on the plane.”

Jennifer’s jaw dropped open, and she let out an excited squeal.

“Look at you!” she punched me playfully on the arm. “You go, girl!”

“You’re not upset with me?”

“Why would I be upset? You’re a grown-ass woman, and who you sleep with is your business.”

I let out a long sigh, feeling relief at having finally confessed. Now I could feel melancholy about it.

“The thing is, as good as it was at the time, he changed afterward. He got all... cold. Distant.” I hugged myself and shivered, though the restaurant was hardly cold. “I’m such an idiot.”

I shook my head.

“Not for that part. For thinking that, you know, that there might be something more to it. You know? That thinking someone like him could ever be with someone like me.”

Jennifer snorted. “Oh please, you’re always so down on yourself. You deserve a hundred Evans.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my friend.”

She put her hand on my shoulder and gave it a little shake.

“Hey now, come on. You’re sassy, smart, damn good at your job, and you have a great sense of humor. Of course Evan’s interested in you. What guy wouldn’t be interested in you?”

Much as I hated to admit it, her pep talk did make me feel better. I still wasn’t

convinced that I hadn't bitten off more than I could chew with how I felt for Evan, but she did make me believe in myself, at least for a little while.

I reached for my drink and knocked over my purse. My phone spilled out, and I frowned when I saw the screen. I had more than a dozen missed calls and half that many messages.

I scrolled through the messages and found they were all from the same person, someone called Jenna. It took me a moment to recall that Jenna was the name of Evan's personal assistant. It was through her I was to have most of my contact with him. Another degree of separation that had me wondering if I wasn't a sucker after all.

"Who in the world is trying to get a hold of you that much?" Jennifer asked. Her eyes lit up eagerly. "Oooh, is it Evan?"

"No, it's Evan's assistant," I said as I stared at the screen. "Her last text says there's been a complication."

"A complication?"

"She wasn't more specific. The one thing she was clear on though, is this—the wedding's been canceled."

Chapter 6

Amanda

“Do you have any idea how close you are to losing your job, Fitz?”

Evan’s cold as ice tone belied the fire in his eyes. I thought that the nebbish-looking Mr. Fitz was going to burst into flames right then and there. Or maybe run and jump out the top floor of the office in an effort to escape Evan’s wrath.

I’ve been in a lot of office buildings and boardrooms in my time working for Jennifer’s charity. Possibly hundreds. And I’d never been in any nearly as soulless and spartan as that boardroom. Everything was black and white with hints of industrial, dull metal.

The setting seemed to translate directly into the people in the boardroom. It was a great term, boardroom because everyone in that chamber was stiff as a board. They all addressed Evan as ‘sir’ or as Mr. Jones. Usually ‘sir’. There were no smiles, no levity. It was all somber and businesslike.

I couldn’t get over the change that had come over Evan. He was no longer the sensual, passionate darling he’d been on the plane. This was a cold-blooded assassin of the business world. His suit might as well have been sewn out of the broken hearts of his enemies.

I found myself worried for Fitz’s sake. The poor guy was trying to explain why he hadn’t been able to find anyone to be Evan’s fakewife.

I had been summoned to this meeting to try and salvage the idea of a fake wedding,

even though Fitz seemed to think it impossible. I was starting to wish I'd stayed home, because Evan's cold-blooded wrath was frightening to behold.

"If you will just listen to me, sir, I'll explain everything." Fitz swallowed hard. "It's been a series of unfortunate events and strange happenstance."

"What's the difference between a reason and an excuse, Fitz?" Evan drummed his fingers on the table. "I really believe that our time together is coming to an end."

"I'm sorry, sir. I really am. I have lined up several candidates, but sadly every time something has made them toxic to the point of radioactivity."

"Like what?" Evan snapped.

Fitz pushed his glasses up higher on his nose and cleared his throat.

"Ah, well, let's take Hillary Gomez, the former TV star."

"I thought she was the ideal candidate. I mean, she has such a squeaky-clean image," Evan said.

"Ah, well, about that..." Fitz cleared his throat. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a folded blue and white handkerchief, which he used to mop his sweating brow. "It seems that Miss Gomez was at Seth Goren's afterparty and got into some, shall we say, 'party favors' that sent her on a crazed bender."

Fitz turned his phone around so that Evan could see the screen. It appeared to be news helicopter footage of a high-speed car chase. The banner at the bottom read Former Kid Star Now in High-Speed Chase After Leaving the Scene of an Accident.

“One hundred miles, thirty-eight police cars, and one smashed donut shop later, she’s landed her perky little butt in rehab. So much for the squeaky-clean image.”

Evan seemed slightly less peeved. Not very much, but slightly.

“Very well. What about Scarlett Lakes? She’s up for an Academy Award, that has to be good publicity.”

“I’m afraid that Miss Lakes is no longer a viable option, either.”

Evan stood up and looked Fitz straight in the eyes.

“Fitz, I trusted you to handle this. I’m starting to feel like I have misplaced that trust. Sorely.”

Fitz mopped more sweat off his brow and cleared his throat several times before speaking

“I’m afraid it was out of my control, sir. Miss Lakes’ ex-boyfriend Chet Freeman—”

“Is that the pro wrestler turned actor guy?” Evan asked.

“Yes, the very same. He leaked a sex tape online as revenge porn. Miss Lakes is going into seclusion and her career prospects aren’t looking so hot right now.”

“Hardly her fault. Or yours, Fitz.” Evan’s eyes narrowed. “Now please tell me that Renee Paltrow is going to work out?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Our former Olympic figure skating champion has now joined the Committee to Rebuild American Patriotism. She’s shaved her head and declared that lizard people are running secret sex cults in the attics of Pancake Houses across the



United States.”

I snorted with laughter. I couldn't help it. Everyone stared at me like I'd just farted in church, and my cheeks burned with embarrassment.

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“Sorry,” I said lamely. After what seemed an eternity, Fitz started speaking again.

“Obviously, her involvement in the organization is going to make it impossible for her to be your fake lover.” Fitz shook his head. “I’m sorry, sir. I vetted those candidates myself. I had no idea they had so many skeletons in their closets.”

I started brainstorming as Fitz and Evan rattled off a bunch more candidates that would never work for this, that, or the other reason. As they wound down, I found the courage to speak.

“So, ah, why is it so hard to find another celebrity bride, not from your list? I mean, there has to be someone willing to go for this, right?”

Fitz pushed his glasses up and gave me a look like he was trying very hard not to be annoyed with me. Jenna, Evan’s assistant, turned a cold-blooded glare my way.

“You don’t understand how rigorously these people have their lives scheduled. It’s not as if we can simply call them up on the telephone or shoot them a text. We have to go through their agents, their lawyers, and probably their agent’s lawyers and their lawyer’s agents just to reach the actual celebrity in question. We simply do not have the time for all of that. We need to pull the trigger on this fake wedding soon, or millions of dollars and many man-hours of prep time will be wasted.”

“I don’t get it. You could still postpone for a little while, right?” I shrugged.

“Because,” Jenna said with ice in her veins and her words, “our marketing department has already secretly leaked the date of the wedding to the press. We need

to either cancel the wedding or go through with it. There will be no postponement.”

Evan tightened his hand into a fist. When he spoke, his voice was equally tight.

“Canceling is not an option.” His voice brooked no debate, and his cold gaze dared anyone to question him. “I want those projected profits. I want that wedding. We are going to make it happen. Period, end of story.”

The room fell silent as everyone struggled to brainstorm an idea. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. I looked around at the room and tried to gauge their reactions.

“Wait, I’ve got it,” Fitz said, slapping his hands together with glee. “Why didn’t I see it before?”

Evan gave him a withering look, and Fitz seemed to lose a lot of wind from his sails.

“What have you got, and it had better be good, Fitz.”

“Um, two words. Redemption. Arc.” He moved his hands across the air as if they were up on a marquee. “Redemption arc. Everyone loves a good redemption story. We pick one of our starlets who’s had her public persona besmirched. Then we have the two of you meet and spin it that you fell in love due to a happy but unexpected circumstance, and now you’re helping her to be better.”

Evan scowled, drumming his fingers on the table again. His reflection showed on the highly glossed table, and his distorted features almost made him look like a demon. I knew that Evan was one of those kinds of guys who wanted results, and he wanted them right now. The only problem was, he may have been trying to grasp too much.

“How is that going to work? Isn’t one of those women in rehab?”

“Well, we could have you check into rehab, and it would be a double redemption arc story.”

“Check into rehab?” Jenna scoffed. I was glad to see her ire directed at someone else for a change. “Are you insane? The boss can’t be seen as having any form of incompetence or it’s going to tank stock prices and decrease net value. You know, the exact opposite of what we’re trying to achieve?”

“I agree with Jenna,” Evan said, ice in his tone. “No rehab for me.”

“Then maybe we could say that you were going in there as, I don’t know, a counselor or a sponsor or something.”

Jenna shook her head.

“It’s too off-brand for Evan. He’s not likely to do something like that unless it’s the most glamorous rehab center in the world.”

Fitz slapped his hand on the phone in his pocket.

“If you give me ten minutes and a web search, I’ll find you that super glamorous rehab center. I’m telling you this idea has legs.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Evan glared him to silence. “Because I’m cutting it off. Next.”

It took me a moment to realize he meant ‘next idea’. The silence stretched out to very uncomfortable levels. Evan shot glares at his people, as if accusing them of the worst sins imaginable because they didn’t have fresh ideas ready for the grinder that was his brain.

“What do I pay you people for?” he growled.

Because I felt bad for them, and because I wanted to put an end to the uncomfortable silence, I blurted something out that I maybe shouldn't have.

“Why does it have to be a celebrity, or an influencer, or a professional athlete?”

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All three of them turned their gazes on me. I shifted in my seat, uncomfortable under their sustained scrutiny. I couldn't tell what they were thinking. Their gazes remained inscrutable. I feared that either Jenna would say something cutting, or Evan would snap about me keeping my mouth shut. I was even worried Fitz would smirk and adjust his glasses like he did when he felt contempt.

Then Evan turned to look at Fitz. Fitz took a deep breath, his brows arching high under his balding pate.

"It could work, sir. A Cinderella story. Rags to riches."

"Beauty and the Beast," Jenna offered.

"Ha ha, Jenna," Evan said. I wasn't even sure she had made a joke. "Is this something that you really think is going to work, Fitz? Or are you just grasping at straws to save your seven-figure salary and corner office?"

Fitz opened his mouth, closed it, then shrugged.

"Can it be both?"

"I don't know, Fitz..."

"All I'm saying, sir, is that there are worse ideas. If it's a nobody, someone with zero public recognition factor, then they won't have a reputation to manage or tarnish. Not to mention that when it's time to terminate the agreement, it will be so much easier. Much easier than it would be if the woman were a celebrity, don't you agree?"

Evan took a long breath, then let it out through his nose, making his nostrils flare. He looked at Fitz like a predator crouched in a tree.

“I don’t know about this idea, Fitz. What good is it going to do for my reputation if the woman I wind up fake marrying isn’t famous?”

“That’s the beauty of it, sir. The one place your Q ratings are lagging behind is in middle America. You know, the whole mom, apple pie, working the plow kind of people. They’ve been turned off by your wild antics and playboy tendencies. If you settle down with a nice, normal person instead of a celebrity, well, they’re going to think you’re, you’re...”

Fitz snapped his fingers as he struggled to come up with the right word. Jenna sprang into the gap.

“Down to earth?” she said.

“Down to earth,” Fitz repeated gratefully, bobbing his head in agreement.

Evan steepled his hands together and considered his marketing director. For a long moment, no one dared speak while he weighed Fitz’s fate.

Then he rose from his seat and walked around to my side of the table. I gasped as he took my hand and looked me in the eyes.

“Amanda,” he said, holding me hypnotized with his stalwart gaze, “will you marry me?”

## Chapter 7

Amanda

I stood there, my mouth gaping open wider than the Lincoln Tunnel. Time seemed to stretch out into infinity. No one dared to speak and shatter the pristine illusion that everything was hunky-dory and normal.

Only it wasn't normal. Eccentric hunky billionaires are not supposed to take your hand and propose marriage. Even if you have slept with them on a plane with clear walls and floors. It just doesn't seem like a logical trajectory.

I kept waiting for someone to laugh. If someone laughed, then it would all be a big fat joke and we could move on. Only nobody laughed. I started trying to will people into laughing so I could escape that endless moment.

Come on, laugh. Somebody laugh! Now's the time, Evan. Look at me and say, 'just kidding' and let me off the hook already.

Nobody laughed, and it started to sink in that maybe, just maybe, this was for real. That had me reeling even more. I mean, on the one hand, hearing a marriage proposal—even a fake one—from a man who was a literal dream sent my body and soul into heaven. It was surreal, the best kind of surreality in fact. The dream come true variety.

On the other hand, the logical part of my brain knew that it was just a business deal. Nothing personal. Just business. That phrase had never been truer than it was at that moment.

"You know," Fritz said, stroking his weak little chin. "I think I kind of like this idea, sir. Well played."

Fritz gestured at me.

"I mean, look at her. You couldn't ask for a more self-made woman. She started off



as a literal waitress and now she's an event manager for one of the biggest charity organizations in the entire world. You don't get more rags to riches than that."

Jenna shrugged.

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“I do like the idea of having a candidate with an actual brain, rather than some vapid actress or influencer.”

I turned to Jenna. She shot me a wink and what may have been the ghost of a smile. I sort of felt better about her. I figured maybe she wasn't the soulless corporate drone that I had thought her to be originally. I supposed that having a boss like Evan meant she had to adopt a certain type of persona just to deal with him.

I turned back to Evan, who continued to hold my hand, waiting for my answer. I knew it would be fake, but at the same time, I thought how good it would feel, even just as a pretend love affair.

But then I remembered the sticking point. It would be a fake marriage. I would be opening myself up to that hurt that we'd all talked about and dismissed at Rinaldo's bar.

“No, I can't do this.” I gently pulled my hand out of his grasp. “I'm sorry, I just can't do it. I can't be part of a fake relationship, let alone a fake wedding.”

Evan cocked an eyebrow at me.

“There's no reason for you to decline my offer.”

“Yes, there is. I just said I don't want to. That's a good enough reason.”

His lips twitched slightly, but his gaze remained steadfast.

“I fully vetted you as well, Amanda. I know for a fact that you are single. You spend most of your time working. Your career is your life, as much as you might hate to admit it.”

He was right. I really was something of a workaholic. I rarely, if ever, dated. For one thing, we were always holding events all over the country, even all over the world. It was hard to meet anyone when you were always on the move.

But that was just a cop-out. I knew the truth. Sticking to my job was easier. I didn't have to feel anxious or worry about whether a guy was into me or not. I could just concentrate on my career.

“Besides,” Evan continued as I reeled from his previous speech. “You can continue to work for the charity just as you do now. The only difference will be that you will now have my financial resources, public sway, and business clout at your disposal.”

“That's a very good point, and it would provide a considerable boost to the cause of saving the rainforest,” I said, “but still, you're talking about my life here. I can't just upend it and play your phony wife for the sake of an increase in your stock prices, or to make you more money.”

“It would only be for a year.” Evan's voice sounded so reasonable. Or maybe I was just looking for excuses to say yes. “Only a year, that's all. Think of all the good you could do, Amanda, with my financial might and celebrity at your behest.”

I understood the value of his proposal. Logically, it made good sense. I could use his financial means and clout to get things done. To make a real difference for the rainforest and the people who lived there.

But my soul was in disarray. I just couldn't bring myself to agree, as much as part of me wanted to.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “My answer is still no.”

Evan’s face darkened, and I shrank back from his gaze.

“Everyone out.”

Without a word, everyone rose to their feet and headed for the door, even Jenna, his personal assistant. I started to leave as well, figuring he was mad at me.

“Not you, Amanda,” he said. “Sit down.”

I sat down and spread my hands out wide in supplication.

“I’m sorry, Evan. I just can’t help you with this.”

“I see.” His cold gaze melted into a smoldering heat wave. I felt a tingle run down my spine. He hadn’t looked at me like that since that night on the plane. “So, perhaps you need another type of convincing?”

He reached out and took my hand in both of his own. Evan stroked his nimble fingers along my skin. I felt goosebumps rising all over me. It felt so good, so fantastic even to have him touch me again. Moreover, the velvety soft tone had returned to his voice.

“What are you doing?” I asked, but it was a rhetorical question. A blind man could have seen what he was proposing. I knew it, and my body knew it too. I felt myself getting hot.

He rose from his seat, releasing my hand. I panted as he walked behind my chair. I stared out the window, flashing back to when we’d flown above the clouds at sunset.

“Remember that fiery sunset, Amanda?” he purred. “I stood behind you, just like this.”

He put his hands on my shoulders, and I couldn't stop a sigh from issuing from my mouth. I remembered all right. I had been aching for him to touch me again for so long, despite all of my protests and worries that a man like him could never want a woman to like me.

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“I can find any bimbo to pretend to be my fake wife,” he said softly, his breath hot on the nape of my neck. He moved his lips in close to my ear. “Someone who wouldn’t care about your charity. In that case, you’ll get nothing.”

He reached down and started unbuttoning the pearl snaps of my ivory silk shirt. I trembled, my heart thudding in my chest. Some part of my mind screamed we shouldn’t be doing this, but the beating of my own heart drowned it out.

“I don’t want that, Amanda. I want you. I’ve only wanted you ever since that unforgettable plane ride.”

He kissed the back of my neck, and I let out a deep moan, my eyes fluttering closed. He had my shirt unbuttoned all the way to my navel at that point.

I wanted to give in to him. I wanted to surrender so badly, but I knew that he was simply out of my league. I grasped his hands, stopping them from continuing to disrobe me.

“You don’t want me,” I said, my voice growing firmer. “You want an obedient little employee to follow you and bat her eyes at you for a year. I mean, you’re not asking me to be your wife or even your girlfriend. Not really. You’re asking me to be your employee. Should I call you sir like everyone else does?”

He growled low and deep and sexy in his throat.

“I like the sound of that. I like it when you call me ‘sir’.”

He went back to kissing my neck. I let go of his hands and he went back to undressing me.

Evan got to the last snap, then unexpectedly stood up. I ached to feel his heat close to me again, in spite of myself.

“Stand up,” he said firmly.

“Yes,sir,” I said like a snotty little brat.

He arched his eyebrows as I rose to my feet.

“Take off your shirt.”

“Right away,sir. Whatever you say,sir. Your wish is my command,sir—”

I had my shirt halfway off when he suddenly surged forward, taking my biceps in his grasp. His face was so close to my own, my lips ached to feel his touch.

“That’s right. Whatever I say.”

He grabbed me tight, hands clasping my ass in a firm grip. Evan pressed my body against his own. I could feel the hardening lump in his pants straining to reach me. My pussy throbbed, my brain buzzed, and I felt very lightheaded and dizzy.

Evan lifted me up and sat me down firmly on the tabletop of his soulless meeting room. The skyscrapers looked on like silent sentinels, not judging but not offering anything else, either. A stark contrast to how the plane ride had felt, I had to admit.

But even if the setting was cold, Evan’s touches were hot. Red hot. I felt like streaks of lightning followed his every caress.

“Are you going to eat my pussy again,sir?” I asked mockingly.

“Not this time,” he growled. “This time I’m going to show you who’s boss.”

“You’re the boss,sir. You’re the man, nobody’s got as big a dick as you—”

He kissed me hard, deep, silencing my smart mouth. His hand firmly groped my breasts as he pushed me back onto the table.

Evan lightly bit my lower lip, stretching it out slightly before pulling away from me enough to look me in the eyes. His gaze was like an inferno, filling me with heat, but also mischievous energy.

“I’m going to stuff you full of hard cock now, Amanda.”

I made an ‘O’ with my lips and sucked in a hiss of air.

“Oh, yes, sir,” I said, not having to fake the eagerness in my voice.

He unzipped his fly and withdrew his admittedly phenomenal cock. Evan roughly pushed my thighs apart and pushed the head of his cock between my wide open, swollen pussy lips. My eyes squeezed shut as he thrust fully into me for the first time since the plane.

Evan glided his cock inside of me. My pussy convulsed, exultingin his presence. His hands slapped onto the table on either side of my head as he thrust away.



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“How you like that?” he growled.

“If Evan Jones comes back, can you tell him that his grandpa was trying to fuck me?”

His eyes widened, and I shot him a fierce grin. Then he clamped his hand down on my neck and drove into me harder. His teeth gritted, his eyes shone with that perfect moment where men give in to their physical desires.

“You like it hard, huh?” he growled.

“Yes,” I gasped between slapping thrusts. It felt amazing, but I couldn’t help but poke the bear. “So, if you want to start fucking me hard any time now, I’m ready.Sir.”

His fingers tightened on my throat, and he went at me even harder. The desk shook on its foundation, rattling the chairs. A folder slid off and tumbled to the floor, sending papers flying about in disarray.

I cried out, wrapping my legs around his waist as he thrust into me like a pile driver. His soulless office had never seen passion like this, I knew that for a fact.

“Are you coming?” he asked as he thrust me over the precipice of orgasm.

“Yes, SIR!” I screamed and that time I wasn’t mocking him. I screamed my throat raw as he filled me with his hot seed. His cock throbbed inside of me for several seconds after he came.

I pushed him on his chest until he got the hint and straightened up. I slid off the desk

and pulled my skirt back down as he looked on in confusion.

I buttoned up my shirt without saying a word, and then walked out of the office. I paused at the door, not even fully looking at him, just glancing over my shoulder.

“All right, Evan. Send me the damn contract.”

## Chapter 8

Amanda

Have you ever seen one of those reality shows following a bride and groom around as they prepare and then engage in the most fabulous of weddings? Magnify that by about ten million times and that’s how opulent my ‘dream’ wedding to Evan was.

I walked over the verdant green of beautifully manicured grass. The wedding was being held outside. Part of me had hoped for rain. Not just so that the day would match my mood. But also because I could just see Evan yelling at the sky and telling God to knock it off long enough for us to get married.

There were hundreds of guests, literally. I’d never seen so many people in expensive suits and gowns in my entire life. I bet that the cost of the combined wardrobe of those gathered outside of the palatial estate manor house was higher than the gross national product of some small countries. I saw all of the biggest designers, and quite a few that I didn’t recognize—which probably meant they were even more super exclusive and expensive.

The manor was one of several that my husband-to-be—make that fake-husband-to-be—owned around the world. Evan didn’t do things by half measures. If he thought he was going to stay somewhere for more than a couple of weeks out of the year, he bought himself a mansion in that area.

I passed by a champagne fountain, amber fluid spilling down in cascading waves. The bubbles caught the sunlight and splashed it in dazzling colors onto the white lace tablecloth. I wished I could be one of those bubbles. A brief, effervescent existence where you just keep going up, up, up, and then it's over and you're never any the wiser.

Queen Bey belted out her top tunes on a private stage built just for the wedding. I had no idea how much my husband-to-be had paid her to be there, but I'm willing to bet it was millions. Probably tens of millions.

I spotted celebrities, movie stars, musicians, and high-ranking politicians from all over the globe. I was way past the point of being star-struck by any of it. There were also a large number of reporters there, the press having been invited because that's what it really was about.

I passed through the outdoor gala section and came upon the rainforest. Evan had spared no expense, bringing in the hardier species of tree from the Amazon. He wanted a genuine article rather than a facsimile.

When it came to the animals, we didn't want to traumatize any of them. So, holograms took their place. You could see roaring jaguars, slithering anacondas, and brightly plumaged birds all through the micro forest. I marveled at how amazing the technology was even as I realized that it didn't matter. Nothing really mattered since it was all a fake wedding anyway.

The only real animals at all were the capybaras. The gentle, docile creatures were extra cuddly, and their petting zoo was one of the more popular areas of my wedding. I kept walking really fast so that nobody would try and strike up a conversation with me. I didn't want to speak to anyone and let my mask slip. I was afraid I would blow the entire scheme with an errant comment or even just the look in my eyes.

I knew that anyone who got a good look at me would be able to tell something was off. You weren't supposed to walk around despondent, like you're in a gulag instead of at your own wedding.

I headed inside the manor house, hoping to run into fewer people there. I meandered around through the kitchen where the cooks strove to keep the steady stream of delicious food flowing to the numerous guests. I passed through the servants' break room, where they smoked cigarettes and drank coffee and talked about what an amazing wedding it truly was. It made me feel even more ungrateful.

I found my way up the grand marble staircase to the second floor. There I made my way through hallways wide enough to drive a Mack truck through. The artwork on the walls was all original, no prints. Some of it more properly belonged in a museum, it was so historically significant.

I reached the end of the hallway and pushed open a set of glass double doors. From there I stepped onto a half-circle balcony, its rails carved into an elaborate pattern of ivy leaves and vines. I could look down on almost the entire wedding from there. It should have been nothing short of magical.

The only problem? It was fake. All fake. The wedding wasn't real, so the ceremony, by proxy, wasn't real, either. It made me angry to think that all of the people at our wedding were having a fabulous time. Meanwhile, me, the bride, the one who was supposed to be having the best time of all, was wallowing in abject misery.

And I couldn't let on to a single soul that this was what was happening inside of my head. I had to keep the secret for the sake of our big lie. After all, how was he supposed to make his billions of dollars if I didn't?

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The charity would benefit greatly, I kept telling myself. It already had. Already we'd been able to buy vast swaths of the forest back from the logging companies just because Evan knew some people in the government. Who could even tell how much good Evan's public persona and magnetic personality had done for the cause?

It didn't feel magical, but at least the logical side of my brain found some benefit. I tried to make that enough but largely failed.

I sensed a presence behind me a moment before the doors to the balcony swung open wide. The diaphanous curtains billowed out and brushed my bare ankle before subsiding. Evan stepped onto the balcony with me. I stiffened up at his arrival. Another expectation laid upon my shoulders.

"Amanda, what are you doing here?" he checked his phone. "We have to take photos in twenty minutes. That doesn't give you much time for mingling beforehand, not to mention cozying up to the reporters."

My face twisted up into a scowl, but I wiped it from my face before I turned around to look him in the eyes.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I said, ice in my tone and in my gaze. "Please forgive me, sir. I'll return to my duties like a good little employee."

I stormed off the balcony, leaving him flustered and alone. What was he going to do, complain that I'd gone off to do just what he wanted me to? The very definition of a white mutiny.

I mingled with the crowd, pretending to have fun if nothing else. My attempts to put on a mask for the crowd grew even more urgent when I spotted Jennifer, Ramone, and Jake approaching me. Each of them wore a look of concern, and maybe a little guilt.

Jennifer's face said it all. When she'd told me to go ahead and take a shot at Evan, this wasn't what she meant. She knew it and I knew it.

"Hey, you," Ramone said. "How are things going?"

"How do you think things are going?" Jake sneered. "She's trying to pretend like the wedding isn't fake."

"Shhh," I said, putting my finger to my mouth. "Don't say that aloud. Or at all. Preferably, don't say it at all."

"I feel bad that you're doing all of this for us," Jennifer said with a pout.

"Don't be." I plastered the fakest, most faux sincere smile onto my face that I could muster. "I'm doing it for the world. We only have one planet, you know. And besides, every girl dreams of a fairy tale wedding. I'm actually getting one. Isn't it great?"

I gestured around, throwing my arms out like a spokesmodel on the Price is Right.

"Look at my party! I think you guys should go off and enjoy yourselves."

I hugged them all together, and then made my escape. The smile faded from my face as I found a private, secluded spot next to one of the champagne fountains. I drank an entire glass in one go and gasped at the end as the warmth spread through my belly.

“Shit,” I said with a grimace.

“I hope you’re not getting too drunk for the ceremony, not to mention Evan’s speech.”

I started, then turned around to find Jenna standing there. That personal assistant gave me the creeps. I couldn’t tell if she liked me or hated my fucking guts. She had the same cold stare that Evan had.

“You insisted that Evan give this speech. It’s imperative that you are there, on the stage, with him.”

I heaved a long sigh. “All right, fine.”

Jenna cocked an eyebrow. “Why do you act like you’re going off to the gallows? Are you that fed up with Evan already?”

“Evan? Not Mr. Jones?”

Her eyes narrowed, and a smile played on her lips. “I hope you won’t tell him. Oh, and you should give Evan a chance. He’s not such a bad guy once you get to know him.”

“And how well do you know him, exactly?”

“Strictly professionally, of course, he is very particular about that. And I know that you won’t believe me, but actually he isn’t my type. But listen, what I want to tell you is that there is a decent person behind that façade. And that you really need to get on that stage, all right?”

I narrowed my gaze at her retreating back as she led me toward the stage. She seemed

more or less sincere, like she was trying to build me up. But maybe that had been her game all along. Whatever the case, I was in a damn sour mood when I took up my position. Since my parents had passed away, Ramone did the honors of walking me down the aisle.

The march of the bride is supposed to be that one moment in a woman's life where everyone in the room is looking at her. For me, it was torture. I kept expecting people to start whispering about how I was a fraud, how the whole wedding was fake. Couldn't they see that it was all fake?

When I got to the ivory, ribbon-wrapped pillars of the altar, I felt like I wanted to throw up. Ramone kissed me on top of the head, and I hugged him tight. I was glad he was there with me. Then, I had to leave him behind and climb the steps.



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Evan cut an impressive figure in his white tuxedo. His handsome face was creased with a smile, a smile so unexpectedly warm that I almost stumbled.

“You are hauntingly beautiful, Amanda,” he said softly as we joined hands at the altar. The minister began his spiel, but I was lost in Evan’s eyes. All of a sudden the warmth was back. The sincerity was back. I felt as if I really were the only woman in the entire world for him at that moment, and the feeling was incredible.

I tried to remind myself it was all fake, but the look in his eyes did not seem fake. When it came time to say our vows, I mumbled through the lines prepared for me by Jenna. I got a few ‘oohs’ and ‘aaahs’ like it was so sweet, but it didn’t make a lot of impact.

When it was Evan’s turn, he took the microphone off the stand and turned to address the crowd.

“This is the most amazing woman in the entire world to me.”

I flinched and felt a bit dizzy. I knew it was insincere, but it was still nice to hear.

“In fact, she’s opened my eyes to the plight of the Amazon. Or should I say, the plight of the entire planet. If the rainforest goes, our world is in serious jeopardy of becoming unlivable. So, if you can’t find it in your heart to save the rainforest because it’s the right thing to do... do it because it’s going to save your damn life.”

He turned back to me and held my hands.

“How was that?” he whispered.

“Not bad,” I said, though I did it with a cheeky smile. The minister asked us to say our I-do’s. He seemed so sincere when he uttered the words that I melted a little.

Then he kissed me. I felt connected to his body and soul for a few brief seconds. The crowd erupted into applause, and we turned to face them as husband and wife.

Fake husband and fake wife.

I managed to keep smiling all the way through the reception, and even when we climbed into the limo. The moment the door closed, he began kissing the back of my neck, in the way that normally drove me crazy.

I pushed him away from me and sat up very straight in my seat.

“I don’t think sleeping with my employer would be ethical,” I said in a very cold, stiff, and formal tone. “Sir.”

## Chapter 9

Evan

“Our profit margins for Geodot are up seven-point-five percent and—”

Bam!

The heavy bag deformed under the impetus of my gloved fist. I felt the sting in my knuckles and knew I’d have abrasions afterward. I didn’t care. The executive from Geodot paused in his oration, adjusted his glasses, and then sheepishly looked over at Jenna.

“Continue with your report,” she said. “He’s listening.”

“Are you sure? He seems rather involved in what he’s—”

I spun around on the exec in a half crouch, feeling like a lion about to pounce on a rival.

“Why are you questioning a direct order from my personal assistant?” I snapped. “She speaks with my voice. Remember that.”

I went back to working over the bag, and he hastily went back into his diatribe about the relative losses and gains of Geodot. I was beginning to wonder whether or not I should even keep the company at that point.

Bam!

The sound of my fist hitting the heavy bag, the rattle of heavy chains, the slap of my sweat as it flung off my body onto the canvas all faded into the background along with the exec’s sonorous hum of a voice. I drifted into a realm of introspection I didn’t visit very often.

Amanda had refused me. Refused me. No woman had ever turned me down before. Not that I could remember.

I wanted to concentrate on what the exec was saying. It was even crucial that I do so. And yet, all I could think about was Amanda. She’d refused me, which made me a bit angry at her.

And yet, she intrigued me. I was enjoying the prospect of a hunt. I normally got women to do whatever I wanted with little effort. Now I was going to put on my best big game hunter outfit, as it were, and match wits with more clever prey than I’d

known in some time.

Bam!

The smack of leather on canvas snapped me back to the present. The Geodot exec had wrapped up his long-winded diatribe from the sound of it.

The next exec in line was from Weiz and Sons, a financial firm I'd acquired several years ago.

"I'm pleased to report that our fourth quarter earnings exceeded expectations," he said, trying to sound more casual and at ease than the fellow from Geodot had. He was more used to seeing me in my trunks, half naked and glistening with sweat while I engaged in my daily fitness regimen. "We did have some issues with a rather large client defaulting on his loans, however when said client declared bankruptcy—"

Bam!

I was lost in my head again, thinking about the fact that it had been two weeks since the wedding and I hadn't actually slept with my wife one night. And not just in terms of sex, either. Amanda had her own bedroom on the opposite wing of the manor. I rarely saw her for more than brief moments at all unless it was for one of our scheduled public events.

When I suggested that she should at least eat breakfast with me, she did so. I immediately regretted my supposed victory when I saw how she intended to act. She behaved in a cold but cordial manner. Nothing she ever said was rude or an insult. Yet she managed to make the experience so unpleasant we often just sat together and said nothing at all.

Much, I supposed, like a couple who had been married for a long time. I supposed I should have expected it. This was a fake marriage, after all.

Still, would it have been too much for her to at least pretend to get along? I knew that she was right—this was a transactional arrangement. But maybe some part of me didn't get the memo and was hurting because she was so cold and distant.

Bam!

I chastised myself for my moment of weakness. Evan Jones did not get soft spots for women.

Bam!

Another exec took his chance to speak, and this one didn't have as rosy a report to make.

"Ah, unfortunately, sir, Welshie Subs has posted a loss again for this quarter."

I hit the heavy bag with a six-hit combo, punctuating each with the expulsion of rage. Then I turned to face him, resting one arm on top of the swinging bag.

"What did you just say to me?"

"I—Welshie subs has posted a loss again for this quarter. However, with our new initiatives coming, sir, I believe that—"

I turned to Jenna.

"Who's in charge at Welshie?"

She didn't even have to consult her laptop to tell me. She rattled right off the top of her genius head.

"That would be Thomas Helms, sir."

"Helms...Helms...Helms..." I blinked sweat out of my eyes as I tried to remember the man. I owned so many companies. "Wait, is he the legacy CEO?"

"Yes, sir, you left him in place."

"He did a pretty good job of convincing me that he was the man for the job. Obviously, I was mistaken. Send him his papers, he's done."

She took out her tablet and tapped on the screen.

"Done and done. His pink slip will arrive on his desk by express delivery in two hours."

"Who's next in line?"

The exec paled several shades.

"That would be James Brody, sir."

"Who the fuck is James Brody?"

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The exec sheepishly raised his hand.

“Me, sir.”

“All right, James Brody. You’re the guy for Welshie Subs now. You’d better eat, sleep, and shit Welshie Subs. You’d better turn this company around and give me a profit or you’re going to be looking for a new job next. And I don’t give good referrals for incompetents who fail me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, his voice breaking at the end.

“Good. Next.”

I went back to working on the heavy bag as the next exec stepped up to bat.

“Sir, it looks like our payroll problem has worked itself out. More than fifteen percent—”

Bam!

Amanda was determined to act like an employee, just an employee. Certainly not a wife. I suppose perhaps I’d expected her to at least act like a lover, even if it was a fake marriage. I couldn’t get through to her. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t get through to her.

But every once in a while, when she was in an unguarded moment or perhaps feeling a bit cheeky, she would call me sir in just the same teasing, snarky way she had right



before and during our wild sex on the airplane. In those moments, it took every ounce of self-restraint that I had to keep myself in check.

I wasn't used to having to keep myself in check. That was foreign, unfamiliar territory for me to begin with. I was used to being able to get whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it.

Then, factor in the fact that I never felt such an intense desire for a woman before, and I was really confused by the whole affair. I'd had desires, even strong desires for women, but they were always over after the first time I slept with them. I wasn't much for repeat performances. I was an original event sort of man.

Or so I thought. Now all I wanted was to take Amanda again, just as I had on the plane.

Most of my life, I've seen people as being like chess figures on a black and white board. I moved them around at my whim, and if I was playing against someone else, I tricked them into moving their pieces where I wanted them to go.

Only now, there was a rogue queen on the board. Not black or white, blazing red. Before, I was the king of the chessboard in a figurative sense. Now I felt like I was a chess king in the literal sense. Like I was slowly plodding after her while she remained forever out of reach.

It infuriated me to no end. Maybe that's why I couldn't get her off of my mind. Normally I could easily put any woman, no matter how desirable, completely out of my thoughts and concentrate on business.

Now, I was finding it hard to think about anything BUT a woman. How had she done that? When had she sunk her claws into me so deep and so well?

Sooner or later, I would figure out a way to outplay her. Sooner or later, she would be mine and do what I wanted. I was still the king of the chessboard.

Bam!

“—and that’s the complete summary of our fiscal quarter,” the exec finished up. I glanced over at Jenna, and knew from the dull, bored look in her eyes that I had missed nothing of importance.

I pulled my gloves off as the next exec in line started up his spiel. I unwrapped the tape from my knuckles and saw it was bloody. I knew I was going a little bit hard. Slight abrasions burned between my knuckles. That was always the thing about the heavy bag. It didn’t tear up the skin on your knuckles, it split the skin between them.

I sprayed some saline solution onto my knuckles, ignoring the sting, and then wiped my hands on a towel before moving over to the lat rowing machine.

“The revenue report and aging detail are included in the packet I emailed to you this morning, sir,” the executive droned on. I glanced over at Jenna, and she nodded to show I had received such an email.

I slapped the metal pin below the hundred- and fifty-pound mark. I usually worked out at around one hundred and forty, but I was feeling froggy that day. Or maybe because of the situation with Amanda, I just had extra aggression to work out. I wasn’t sure.

I pulled back on the handle with a smooth motion, drawing out the tightly wound steel cable. My arms ached after the tenth rep, but I kept on going, just like the exec desperate to please me with how thorough and detail-oriented he was.

Every time the weights clanked back on top of each other, though, I felt drawn into

my own thoughts again. And every time I visited there, the queen of the chessboard awaited me, mocking me with her presence. Taunting me with her absolute mastery of the board. She constantly had me in check, making me flee around the board instead of taking the initiative.

And when I did go on the offensive, I found myself outplayed at every turn. I never knew a woman to have such power over me. I didn't want to think about it that way, though. I tried to convince myself that she was just being snotty because of the transactional aspect of the relationship.

The exec finished up his spiel, and I turned to him. He looked to be ninety-eight pounds soaking wet, but he was very tall and had a definite presence to him. He struck me as a leader, and I could already tell from his performance he was above average in the competency department.

“Who are you again?”

“Dilbert Messing, from—”

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“Oh yeah. I remember now. You’re doing good work with Forever Fitness. So good, in fact, that I think you’re not being challenged enough. I’m going to give you the Forever Fitness supplement divisions to run, too. How’s three hundred thousand a year on top of your current salary sound?”

“Three hundred thousand?” he sputtered.

“Do you believe this guy, Jenna?” I shook my head. “I don’t know whether to fire you for being arrogant or admire your moxie. All right, you drive a hard bargain. Four hundred k it is. You’d just better deliver results, or you can join the unemployment line with the guy from Welshie Subs.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, clearly overwhelmed but also with eyes gleaming from the opportunity.

“Next,” I said as I went back to my reps.

“There’s nobody left to make a report, sir,” Jenna replied.

“There’s you. How’s our master plan working so far?”

“Your brand recognition and total equity valuation exceeded all estimations so far, sir.”

“That’s excellent news.”

At least one aspect of the fake wedding was working out for me, but it was cold

comfort at best.

“Fitz and I think it’s important that we keep this momentum going by having you and Amanda keep making public appearances as a couple.”

It sounded like a great idea to me. “Good. Let’s bring Amanda in here, right now, so we can discuss it.”

“Right now, sir?”

“Yes, right now. She’s my wife. She can look at me in my skivvies while I work out.”

“You misunderstand me, sir. Amanda is not in the manor at this time. She left earlier today.”

Anger flared up inside of me.

“She left?” I sputtered in rage. “Without my permission? Find her. Now!”

## Chapter 10

Amanda

“You just don’t understand how essential you really are, darling.”

I looked up from my eggs Benedict to Jennifer’s smiling face. Her smile belied all of the complaining she’d been doing about my absence from the charity work.

“I mean, Jake and Ramone are like a couple of wild puppies without you around. They keep trying to do things their own way, and then when I try to lay down the law, they get the sad puppy dog eyes and go ‘but Amanda always says...’ so on and so

forth.”

I chuckled and took a sip of my Mimosa. The Happy Trails Café offered a spectacular vista of the city, especially early in the morning as it faced east. We practically had the café to ourselves because of the extremely early hour. The morning sun had just peeked up over the horizon, a fat and blurry red blob tingeing the thin and wispy clouds with gold.

“I mean, it’s gotten so bad that Jake and Ramone are saying they had it better at the restaurant.”

I laughed, remembering my days as a waitress there. No way would either of those men even think about actually following through on their threats. I knew that for a fact. Food service sucked. Their current jobs allowed them to make a very comfortable living and take care of their families, and no matter how much of an adjustment it was getting used to Jennifer’s management style, I knew they weren’t going anywhere.

“Well, don’t worry about it. Soon enough I’ll be back organizing events for the charity. I’ve had time to think about a ton of new ideas. We’re going to do more than just save the world, Jennifer. We’re going to change it.”

Her lips spread in a wide grin.

“Now that’s the Amanda I know and love.”

The smile faded, and a grimace replaced it. She put a hand over her belly and then sipped a bit of water.

“Hey, are you all right, Jen?”

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“I’m fine,” she said, though she looked a little green around the gills.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m just a little bit nauseated. It should pass here in a moment.”

“Oh,” I said, realization dawning in my mind at last. “Is this a pregnancy thing?”

“Yes, it is.” She smiled. “Don’t get me wrong, my life with Marshall is perfect and I wouldn’t change a thing. I’m not about to complain about some morning sickness. Here I thought it wouldn’t happen since I got up so early. I guess I don’t have to be sleeping for it to strike.”

I leaned down and spoke to her belly.

“Hey, Jake or Ramone, stop making your mama sick.”

Jennifer chuckled.

“There’s no way I’m naming one of my children after either of those clowns.”

I heard her say it, but I didn’t believe her.

“So, things are going well between you and Marshall?” I asked.

A dreamy smile came to her lips.

“Yes, you could say that. Very well. We had a somewhat rocky road to our happily ever after, but now that’s just what it is. A happily ever after. I mean, life’s not perfect. Sometimes I burn my toast, or they lose a suit at the dry cleaners or what have you. But I wouldn’t change anything about my life, you understand?”

I sighed. “I hope I have that someday. You know, if I didn’t upset my karmic balance or something by having a fake wedding.”

“Ah yes,” she said with a chuckle. “Hera, the Greek goddess of marriage and family, will surely smite you down. Or turn your hair into snakes. I forget.”

“It was Athena who turned Medusa’s hair into snakes, and it was so that men would stop forcing themselves on her and she would have a way to fight back.”

“Really?” Jennifer asked, blinking. “That sounds... dark.”

“The old myths were all dark. I took Greek mythology as one of my electives in community college because I thought it would be all easy like Clash of the Titans. Instead, it was some fucked up, harsh shit that would turn you white.”

“Don’t bother going into details,” she said, holding a hand over her mouth. “I’m sick enough already.”

“Do you need me to flag down a waiter and get you a bucket or a trash can?”

“I don’t think so, no,” she said, looking a little bit better at last. She drank some of her tea and looked relieved.

“I think the worst of it is over now. What were you saying about me and Marshall?”

“I was just asking; how did you know that Marshall would change from being a total



alpha male dickwad to this perfect loving husband? Did you have some kind of sign or are you just that good at blow jobs?”

Jennifer spat out her tea in a laugh and then spent a few moments wiping up the mess she’d made.

“Look at what you made me do. To tell you the truth, I didn’t change him at all.”

“Shut the front door,” I said.

“No, really. You see, Marshall may have acted like an alpha male jerk, but on the inside, he really was a loving and nurturing man. He just buried it very deep. In his environment, the place he grew up in and cut his teeth, he had to develop that attitude as a survival tactic. But eventually he realized he needed to let his real self bubble up if we were going to have a life together.”

She gave me a long look and then cocked an eyebrow.

“Wait, why are you asking me this specifically?” Her mouth gaped open in a gasp.

“Oh my God, have you got something for Evan?”

“No!” I said, a little too loud and a little too emphatically.

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“No way,” I said, far more casually. “I mean, sure, he’s good-looking and great in bed, not to mention fabulously wealthy, but come on. I’m just his employee. This is a transactional arrangement. I’m his pretend wife, not his real one. I’d have to be stupid to think that he might have feelings for me. And I’d be even stupider to let myself have feelings for him, right?”

Jennifer cocked an eyebrow. “Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?”

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. Because I had nothing.

“Uh-huh. That’s what I thought. And besides, being an employee didn’t stop me and Marshall from making it work. Maybe you should give it a chance, too?”

She leaned forward slightly, her eyes aglow with mischief. “What’s the matter? What are you afraid of? Are you afraid you might like it?”

I had no idea how to reply to that. On the inside, I still worried that I wasn’t good enough for Evan. I wasn’t a supermodel, ora movie starlet, or a world-famous musician. I was a nobody. Sooner or later, he would get tired of me and find someone more exotic, like trading in a plain old sedan for a sports car.

I couldn’t see any way around winding up with a broken heart. The only problem was, I was worried I’d already gone in too deep. I was afraid I already did have feelings for Evan, and that scared me more than anything else.

Jennifer’s hand went to her mouth, and she rose shakily to her feet.

“I think I need to take off.”

“Oh my goodness, do you need me to go with you?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks,” she said, looking anything else but fine. “I may not even throw up, I don’t... I’ll be fine.”

She walked off toward the exit. I frowned with concern, but I trusted Jennifer to take care of herself and know her limits. I scowled and poked at my breakfast. The Hollandaise sauce was over-salted to my liking.

The doors to the café opened, drawing my attention since it was still pretty early in the morning. My mouth gaped open when I saw Evan. His eyes blazed with cold fury, and even though he tried to hide it, his anger was evident in his stride. The restaurant manager immediately came out from behind the counter, along with a couple of waiters. Evan had that effect on people. When he was angry, they wanted to do anything they could to soothe his mood.

He came to a stop beside the table, and I looked up at him.

“Can I help you?” I asked. “Sorry I didn’t eat breakfast with you, but you were doing your broody, beat up the heavy bag thing this morning anyway, so I thought I’d grab a bite with Jennifer.”

“You are my wife,” he snapped. “You’re going back to the manor. Now.”

I arched my brows at him. “Excuse me, but what did you just say to me?”

“I said you left the house without my permission or consent. Now, you’re coming back with me. Immediately.”

“Are you serious—”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Amanda.”

His nostrils flared, and I could see how he seethed just under the surface. He didn’t go all hysterical, but he was furious.

I calmly dabbed my lips with my napkin and looked up at him.

“Are you sure you want to cause a scene here,sir?”

He spun on the manager and the staff.

“You’re all dismissed for the day. Double pay for all staff, including estimates for lost tips.”

They all bowed their heads and turned about without complaint or argument. I realized it was his restaurant. Of course, he probably owned half the city.

As they left, I looked up at Evan and cleared my throat.

“Obviously I have displeased you,sir.”

“Understatement of the year, Amanda.”

“So,” I said, still in that stiff and formal yet cordial tone, “what are you going to do now? How are you going to punish me for displeasing you,sir?”

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With an animal growl and a blazing gaze, he grabbed me by the arms and drew me to my feet. He kissed me deep, insistent, and I couldn't help but melt into it for a moment.

“How about I show you,” he rasped when we came up for air. “Right here, right now?”

Then he dropped his mouth to my neck, and I felt all of the signals blazing through my body. I was so down to have sex with him again. Or at least, my body was ready.

My mind, on the other hand, still had some semblance of pride.

I pushed him gently but firmly away and stepped back.

“There's no need for that,sir,” I said, trying to stop myself from panting like the wanton wench I was on the inside. “Just send me a disciplinary notice.”

With that, I turned and walked toward the exit.

## Chapter 11

Amanda

Evan pulled me in close, our bodies pressed so tight I could feel the heat coming through his silk shirt. He slid his hand down to my lower back and held me. I put my hands on his shoulders and we turned our faces toward the edge of the red carpet, cheeks pressed together.

Flashbulbs went off like summer lightning as the paparazzi struggled to capture the moment of our happy love. At the moment, I could almost pretend it was all real. My heart thudding so hard in my chest was certainly real.

I had to be careful, though, and not give in to the warm feelings in my chest. This was a role. I was an actress playing a part in one of the most carefully orchestrated PR campaigns in the history of the world.

Evan didn't really mean to hold me so close. He only did it for the sake of the cameras. Only, it seemed like I could feel his heart beating awfully fast, too. It was only a few inches from my own at the moment.

"Evan! Amanda! Over here!"

"Amanda, who are you wearing? Do a twirl for us."

"Evan is in the house, y'all! How about you turn this way and give me some of that love I know y'all feeling!"

"You're doing an amazing job, Amanda," Evan said in a stiff-faced whisper. "I'd never know just how cold you act to me in private."

"Then I guess I'm performing up to your standards, sir," I said, also in a whisper where my expression remained unchanged.

The guy who wanted me to twirl just wouldn't shut up. I knew better than to act annoyed with it. That was one of the rules drilled into me by PR expert Fritz. He said that middle America really resented a celebrity who didn't seem to want to be photographed being fabulous.

I smiled at Evan, and he kissed me on the cheek before releasing me so I could twirl.

“I’m wearing Versace, by the way,” I called out. I remembered how to do my twirl. You turn your head first, then let your body catch up to avoid making yourself dizzy. I held out the train of my green sheath dress. I wasn’t crazy about revealing so much cleavage, but I had to admit, I did look good in that dress.

The flashbulbs went off like mad. The press was eating it up. Fritz had been right all along. People loved the rags to riches thing. I’m just glad I talked them out of creating an alternate history for me, where I grew up on a literal farm with overalls and a straw hat and everything.

I wasn’t really a public figure, but enough people knew me from the charity work that I couldn’t have pulled that off, anyway. Besides, there were limits to my acting ability. I could pretend to be crazy in love with a man who was, in reality, my employer. I wasn’t so sure I could pretend to be a completely different person.

“Come on.” He took my hand in his own. His hand was huge, enveloping me in its warmth. “That’s enough time spent on the red carpet. Time to move inside and mingle.”

“Aren’t there just as many photographers inside as outside?”

He chuckled. “There are more. Many more.”

He tugged me along in his wake. I allowed myself to be pulled down the red carpet. Everything had a gleam of glitz and glamor on it. The brass stands holding the dark red velvet ropes looked freshly polished, gleaming in the flashbulb accentuated lights. Someone had hung streamers of star capes along the marquee of Mann’s Chinese Theater, probably to promote whatever movie premiere we were attending. I honestly couldn’t remember it at the time.

Once we were inside, the feeling of being on Mount Olympus only increased. I felt as

if I were a mere mortal strolling around with the gods. Everyone looked fabulous and decked out to the nines. I didn't see an imperfect head of hair, or a single wrinkle in anyone's garb. The whole lobby sparkled from top to bottom.

The lobby had been turned into something of a ballroom for the event. This included tables set up for the more well-heeled VIPs, which included us, as it turned out. It was kind of strange, being allowed past the beaded curtain into the realm of the ultra-rich and famous.

A balding man with a sharp Italian suit in dull gray approached us. He had a gorgeous woman about a third of his age on his arm. He smiled at Evan with an air of familiarity.



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“Hey there, Evan, I heard you joined the rest of us in the shackles of matrimony.”

He slapped Evan on the shoulder. Evan smiled and shook the man’s hand.

“It’s been a while, Nate.”

He turned to introduce me.

“Nate, this is my wife, Amanda. Amanda, this is Nathaniel Richards, CEO of Paradigm Corporation.”

“Paradigm? You’re a really big deal then,” I said, shaking his hand as well. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh, you’re the only big deal in this room, my dear. Everyone is wondering exactly how you were able to tame the ultimate silverback bachelor, Evan Jones.” His eyes twinkled with amusement. “How did you do it?”

“I didn’t do anything special.”

I turned to Evan and tried to find some way to play my role. It all felt so artificial. I had to tap into our second meeting, when we’d had sex on the plane. The way he’d treated me in that moment, the way he’d looked at me and spoken to me... it all came flooding back.

“He just really seemed like the kind of man who wanted to take care of me. In an emotional and spiritual way, as much as the physical. His touch was so gentle, and I

could tell he really wanted to make me happy.”

My voice broke a little bit at the end, and a tear came to my eye. It was because of the pain of loss. I’d lost that Evan along the way and now only had the cold transactional businessman.

But everyone else present seemed to think I was just overcome with happy emotion because I was a newlywed.

“Aww,” said Nate’s as-yet unidentified female companion. Her voice had a strange nasal quality I did not like and found grating. “That’s so adorbs.”

“Really now?” Nate chuckled gently. “I had no idea that Iceman Evan Jones was such a softie underneath it all. Well, I see Elon over there, so I need to say hello. Good chatting with you, Evan.”

We smiled as they left, and then Evan leaned in close.

“I’m giving you a bonus for that performance. The tear was a nice touch. You really sold it.”

“Yeah,” I said, a bit stiffly. “I really sold it, didn’t I?”

He frowned at me but offered no further comment. We were shown to our table, and I was delighted to see that my napkin had been folded into the shape of a swan.

The table settings probably cost more than the rent on my first apartment—for an entire year. The etching on the silverware alone was super elaborate and probably etched by hand. The glasses were certainly real crystal. I dipped my finger in the champagne glass and then ran the tip around the rim, creating a chiming sound.

“What mischief are you up to?” Evan asked. He was still in his ‘loving husband’ persona, so he asked it really nicely, as an invitation to banter. I decided there was no harm in playing along.

“Hey, it was just the tip of my finger,” I said, stopping the tune. “Which I guess is proof that just the tip can really get you into trouble.”

Evan laughed, and it was a wonderful sound. So rich and velvety and yet boisterous at the same time. I decided it had to be put-on. No way would the Iceman have a laugh like that in him. That meant he must have been one hell of an actor. I didn’t know whether I should be more worried or not.

Someone bellied up to our table. I turned to see a man in a nice suit with a camera slung around his neck.

“Hey there, Evan. How about a few quick words for the people?”

Evan frowned.

“Press isn’t supposed to be in this area,” he said, his cold persona showing under the surface.

“Oh, it’s alright. We’re always happy to talk to the press, aren’t we, darling?” I put my hand on his arm and squeezed really tight. That was another important lesson drilled into my head. Don’t act angry or put upon if the press approached you. That shit would end up on the evening news and internet viral video cycle in a heartbeat.

We were trying to carefully curate Evan’s public image, and that meant he needed to seem more approachable and fun-loving than he had in the past.

“Good point, my love,” he said, putting his hand on top of my own and squeezing

back, though not near as hard as I was squeezing him. “What would you like to know?”

“I was just wondering about this top-secret fabulous honeymoon the two of you had. I mean, you disappeared off the face of the earth for two weeks. Where did you go?”

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We had a story prepared for this as well, but I didn't see a need to use it. I improvised, deciding that the less said the better.

“Well, perhaps it wasn't that we dropped off the face of the Earth,” I said, teasing Evan's soft hair, “as it was that we just didn't see any reason to leave our honeymoon suite for most of the vacation.”

“Oooh, spicy, I love it.” He picked up his camera and looked at us hopefully. “Could I get a quick shot of the two of you kissing?”

Evan looked as if he were about to protest, so I kissed him before he could say anything. And I mean I kissed him, throwing my arms around his neck and pressing myself against him with passion I wasn't sure I was entirely feigning.

He kissed me back and for a moment, a brief, blessed moment, we were back on that plane ride with the translucent walls and floors.

The flashbulb snap was the impetus that ended the moment. When we parted, our eyes met, and I knew Evan was thinking the same thing I was. Why couldn't it be as easy to be a real husband and wife as pretend ones?

We met a ton of people that night. I lost track of how many times I shook hands. I don't think we even made it into the actual movie theater, we were so busy speaking to people and appearing to the press.

Eventually, we wound up in a small but posh green room, safe from the prying eyes of the press or anyone else for that matter. Evan didn't stop playing the part of the

loving, doting husband. He may even have been overplaying it a little. He slid his arm around my waist while I was getting a crab cake and kissed me on top of the head, then dropped his lips to my neck.

It made no sense. Nobody was around to see it. I reacted in spite of myself, leaning my head back and pressing my body against his. When another guest entered the room, we broke apart sheepishly, like a couple of high school kids.

I was starting to lose track of what was real, and what was just roleplaying. On our way out of the green room, we ran into a tall, handsome and mustachioed man named Christian. He was apparently my husband's college roommate and a billionaire in his own right.

"I'm starting to feel lonely here, Ev," Christian said. He had an annoying habit of calling Evan Ev, though my 'husband' didn't seem to mind. "I mean, it's getting mighty sparse in the BBC."

"British Broadcasting Company?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Billionaire Bachelor's Club. First Marshall, and now you."

"You're likely next."

"Never going to happen." Christian arched his brows. "So, I heard that Marshy knocked up his old lady. How about you two? Are you going to have kids?"

"Well, let's just say that we've been giving mother nature ample opportunity since our wedding," I said, putting my hand on Evan's belly and snuggling up to him. I knew it was pretend, logically. But it also felt good. It felt good to act all cutesy and warm with my fake husband. The fake wedding was starting to stir some real feelings, much as I tried to avoid thinking about them.

We all laughed, and Christian became distracted when a leggy blonde walked past. He excused himself, and we returned to the mingle.

Everything was going great from a business perspective. We were selling our fake relationship like mad.

Then, some camera-toting reporter with his ball cap on backwards called out something that made me cringe.

“Hey, Amanda! If you all are in so much love, where’s your wedding ring?”

## Chapter 12

Amanda

I stared in horror at the empty spot on my left ring finger. Shit, what had I done with it? Had I lost it?

The cocky reporter chewed his gum with a loud, snapping sound. He chewed with his mouth open, showing off the rotten remnants of his teeth. A tight white t-shirt framed a body that might have been attractive if not for the smarmy head attached to it.

Come on, think. Think! Before this awkward silence grows more suspicious than it already has.

My mind raced through dozens of possibilities, rejecting them all one after the other. Then it hit me, flashing through my brain like summer lightning. I knew where the ring was. I knew exactly where the ring was at.

The truth did not comfort me very much at all. In fact, the truth was a bit worse than I would have imagined. I almost wished that I had lost it, because that would make

Evan less angry than the truth.

I remembered exactly where the wedding ring was. Sitting in its velvet case on top of the vanity back at the manor. It meant nothing to me and I just forgot to put it on. Simple as that.

I couldn't think of anything to say, my tongue just tied itself in knots. I thought I was done for, but Evan came to the rescue.

"I'm afraid that's my fault." He put his arms around me from behind and pulled me in close to him. Oh, it felt so damn good for him to hold me. I hated the effect it had on me. Hated it and loved it. "She always takes it off in the bathtub, and then puts it back on after. Only this time, I joined her in the bath, and I guess her mind was on other things than the wedding ring."



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Oh, thank God. Or I should say thank Evan.

Relief flooded through me, but it was conditional. After all, Evan might pretend it was no big deal, but I could feel a certain tension in his body. His fingers dug into the pliant flesh of my shoulder a bit more deeply than they should have gone.

Evan hid it well, but he was furious. Furious at me for forgetting the ring. But he also remembered the show must go on.

I would deal with Evan later. For now, the reporter demanded my full attention.

I laughed as if slightly embarrassed and scandalized, and patted Evan's arm.

"Oh, honey, please behave. No one wants to hear such lascivious details of our private life."

For a long moment, I thought the reporter wasn't buying our load of bullshit. His eyes narrowed to slits. His fervid gaze darted between us as his fingers curled around the black carapace of his intrusive camera. I could well imagine a soldier on a battlefield curling his finger around the trigger of a rifle, knowing that soon someone would be dead.

I swear that the next few seconds seemed to take a million years. I waited with bated breath to see what the reporter's reaction would be. Would he buy our story? Or would he run back to his media entity and splash all over newspapers and the internet that we were a fake couple living a lie and trying to perpetuate it to the world?

Then I saw his expression soften. Cautious optimism took root in my breast.

The reporter laughed and snapped a picture of the moment.

“I can see you two are crazy in love. I forget my own wedding ring all the time, too. Drives my wife nuts.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, but I felt Evan stiffen up against me. I knew it wasn't over. I knew I was going to hear more about this before the night was through.

We continued to mingle with the crowd. I met a lot of people I didn't recognize, but felt like I should. These weren't celebrities or professional athletes. They were captains of industry, movers and shakers of the financial world who probably had more power than the president.

All of them seemed both surprised and somehow thrilled that Evan was with me now. One of them in particular I remembered well. Geoffrey Slesoz, a major shipping magnate with a shaved head that made him look like a dime store Lex Luthor. If Lex Luthor were an insufferable little twit.

Geoff gushed and gushed over the two of us. It got to be a little bit embarrassing.

“I'll tell you what, I never thought this guy would get hitched.” He slapped Evan on the arm, a bit hard and drunkenly. Evan flashed a scowl, but it was subtle. I doubt anyone else in the room noticed it but me.

“Why is that?” I asked, just to make conversation and because I was eager to make up for my early fuck up with the wedding ring.

“Well, where do I start?” He put an arm around Evan's shoulders, which was kind of comical because of how hard he had to reach to do so. “I mean, there was the time

that he got the entire backup dancer line from Chicago into his limo after the show—in their costumes. Or then there was the time that he made it with the Milliams sisters—at the same time after Wimbledon.”

“You’re such a kidder, Geoff,” Evan said, a bit stiffly.

“Ah, I can tell I’m wearing out my welcome here. Nice meeting you, my dear.”

He kissed my hand and took his leave. I turned back to Evan and cocked an eyebrow.

“Well, he seems to be buying the story.”

“He’s just super thrilled to see me get married.”

“He’s a good friend then.”

Evan snorted with great derision.

“Geoff? Hardly. I tolerate his presence. He’s only glad that I got married because he thinks it will distract me from my business and give him an advantage. Or did you not hear the way he tried to sow discord between us?”

“I heard,” I said with a chuckle. “It wasn’t that bad. I mean, the Milliams sisters are gorgeous, and I know I can’t compare to an entire chorus line of leggy showgirls.”

His face crumpled into a frown. “You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Why not? It’s true.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but right about then we got dragged into a conversation with some cable news magnate. I had never seen him on television, but

everyone else treated him like he was a big deal. All I knew was he kept looking at my breasts.

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As the night wore on, I felt a mounting sense of dread. I knew that Evan was still mad about the wedding ring. Sooner or later, the party would be over, and then I would have to deal with the fallout.

I didn't know why I was so worried. I supposed that I felt like I'd been a bad employee, and my boss was going to give me a dressing down. Then I thought of the other ways he could give me a dressing down, and it gave me all kinds of consternation.

At the end of the night, when most of the room had emptied out and the really hardcore people had gone on to the afterparty, Evan and I took our leave. We moved past a multitude of paparazzi, many of whom had remained outside for hours waiting for our return. We held hands, waving occasionally when someone called out to us, but trying to affect an air of weariness so that no one would be upset if we didn't stop to chat.

The driver hastened to open the door to Evan's sleek, black stretched limo. Evan put his hand on my back and didn't exactly shove me in, but it was kind of a forceful push.

He climbed in after me and glared the moment the doors shut.

"What is your problem, Amanda?"

"What? Is this about the wedding ring?"

His nostrils flared as he continued to fume with anger.

“You’re damn right this is about the wedding ring. What were you thinking? What kind of loving wife leaves her wedding ring at home on the first big public outing as a married couple?”

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Slow your roll, Evan. You’re starting to sound more like a jealous husband than my employer.”

That took some of the wind out of his sails, but he was still full of plenty of bluster and hot air.

“Fine. Let’s look at it from that perspective, Amanda. Let’s look at it from the perspective of an employer and his employee.”

I didn’t like the tone of his voice. It took everything I had not to cringe away from him. He was seething mad about this, I realized. I really didn’t think it was that huge of a deal. The paparazzi certainly hadn’t thought it was all that big of a deal once we got past his attempt at a ‘gotcha’ moment.

“So, I hired you for one purpose, which was to pretend to be my wife. Correct?”

“I don’t see why we have to go through this bullshit—”

“We’re doing this my way because I have the power and the money. I’m your boss, you’re my employee, remember? Now answer the question. I hired you to pretend to be my wife. Correct?”

I sighed.

“You know that I did—”

“Answer correct or incorrect only.”

I felt anger surge through me. I bristled like a line of pikemen on a medieval battlefield.

“Correct, sir.”

His eyes narrowed to slits. Evan’s face darkened as he continued his tirade.

“Not only did I hire you to be my pretend wife, but I also hired you to be my loving pretend wife. Correct?”

I hated him for making me play this stupid game. It made me feel like I was ten years old and in the principal’s office again. I sullenly glared back at him as I answered.

“Correct, sir.”

“A loving wife, which you are contractually obligated to portray, would not forget to wear her wedding ring. She would revere that wedding ring and the bond it represents, correct?”

Okay, so he technically had me there. I’d been remiss in my duties of portraying his loving wife.

“Correct, sir.” I dropped my gaze to my lap. “All right, I admit it. I screwed up. I dropped the ball—whatever analogy suits you best. All right? I messed up.”

“It’s about time I heard some accountability coming out of your mouth instead of some excuse or backtalk.”

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My lips twitched a snarl, but I decided to let that one slide.

“Well, I really don’t see how it’s that big of a deal. Nobody else noticed all night.”

“It’s a big deal because you’re my wife, and you’re supposed to wear your wedding ring.” He seethed, jabbing a finger at me. “I told you specifically to make sure to wear your wedding ring. You’re mine. My wife is supposed to obey me.”

I gave him a long look.

“Again, sir, I am not your real fucking wife. I am your employee. So, you can stop treating me like a piece of property, because you don’t, in fact, own me.”

His eyes widened. For a second, crazy as it seemed, I thought that maybe he’d forgotten it was a fake marriage. I mean, he looked so confused. Then anger flooded into his gaze.

“Actually, Amanda, according to the contract you signed, I do own you. You can read the sections again where it says that I get to dictate where you go, what you do, and when you do it. So you are going to obey me, for the next year, if nothing else.”

“Obey you?” I sputtered. “You’re stifling me. Can’t you see that? I can’t fucking breathe, Evan. You never let me out of the manor without being glued to your side. You tell me I have to eat breakfast with you in the morning, so you can stare at your tablet or your phone or the latest financial reports as if I’m a piece of furniture, anyway.”



“That assessment isn’t very fair to me,” he said.

“Oh please, don’t even start with that. Everything about this is fair to you. You get what you want, while I have to donate a huge chunk of my life. I’ll do it for the rainforest, and for saving Mother Earth. But I don’t have to like being treated like a piece of garbage, or property for that matter.”

Some of the anger had drained away from his face. He looked confused but he also looked thoughtful. My words were getting through to him, or so I hoped. And since I was on a roll, I kept right on going.

“You keep forgetting something very important. No matter what this contract says, I’m not your slave. I’m your fake wife. Wife and slave are not, in point of fact, synonymous, Evan. You want me to obey because I’m playing your wife? Do you have any idea how fucked up that sounds?”

My voice rang in the confines of the limo. Evan stared at me for a long while, his eyes calculating but full of something else, too. An inscrutable light I couldn’t fathom for the life of me.

“Don’t you see that it’s better my way? You need to obey me, because when you don’t, things like this happen.”

He pointed at my ringless finger.

“Something always goes wrong when I’m not in direct command of the situation. Always.”

I hid my face in my hand for a bit, unable to face him. I was afraid I would say something I would really regret, one way or the other. At length, I looked up at him in annoyance.

“You know, we’ve been arguing about this halfway home, and it’s so stupid. It’s all over me forgetting to wear my wedding ring. Big deal. You heard the reporter. He forgets his ring all the time.”

“My wife shouldnotforget to wear her ring,” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“You’re not just mad on a professional level, are you?” I said with a gasp. “I finally get it. I finally get why you just won’t let this go, why you have to keep harping on it.”

“Oh? Now you’re a psychiatrist as well as an event planner, are you? Adding to your fake wife resume?”

I sneered at him.

“Fine, if you don’t want to hear it, I’ll just sit here and be quiet like a good little submissive wife.

“No, I want to hear it.”

“Too late,” I said, looking out the window.

He grasped me by the shoulder and turned me firmly to face him.

“I said, I want to hear it.” His tone was cold, but his eyes burned like fire.

“Are you commanding me to tell you as my employer,sir?”

“Yes. I am commanding you. Now obey me.”

“I finally figured out why you’re so damn pissed off at me.”

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“I remember that part. Tell me the rest of it. Now.”

I smacked his hand off my shoulder and leaned in, my tone growing more guttural.

“I was worried when I took this job that I would lose myself in the role. That I would get confused about what was real, and what was just the job. Only now I think you’re the one who’s got it all twisted up.”

“You watch your mouth,” he said.

“Oh, watch my mouth, is that how it is?” I sneered. “I guess you can order me to wear tape over my mouth, or a nice ball gag. Then you won’t have to hear me speak, even though you just ordered me to tell you something.”

His expression darkened.

“You think this is a game?”

“Let me answer your question with a question, dear husband. Why?”

He waited, but I didn’t say anything else. His eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Why? Why what?”

“Why do you care so fucking much about me wearing the stupid fake wedding ring for our stupid fake relationship? Huh? Why do you care so much?”

My voice had taken on an almost pleading quality. I realized that I was showing my hand, letting on that maybe I felt more than I should have, but I couldn't stop myself.

“Why do you care so much about your fake wife forgetting to wear her fake wedding ring? It's all bullshit, anyway. All of it, it's not real. It's just not real...”

Evan's eyes burned like fire. He took me by the shoulders and then pulled me into a fierce kiss. My eyes widened, and I stiffened against him, but then I lost myself in the moment. I gave in to the feelings I'd been fighting all night long, letting myself sin, and forget it was all fake for a few blissful seconds.

Evan pulled away from me after stealing my breath and stared at me with eyes shining with purpose.

“Is that real enough for you?”

## Chapter 13

Evan

The taste of her kiss set me afire from the inside out. Passion blazed in my chest like a rising phoenix. I'd been aching to get my hands all over her all night long at the movie premiere. Now I was getting my wish.

Apparently, my kiss was plenty real for her. I went in for seconds and she met me halfway, eager to give me some passion of her own. I kept thinking, God, why couldn't it be like this between the two of us all the time? Why did we have to run either ice cold or fiery hot?

Then I put my hand on the nape of her neck, and she moaned into my mouth, and I forgot all about anything resembling a complaint. I forgot all about the fact it was a

fake marriage, too. All I could think, feel, breathe, and experience was Amanda. She was my whole world, my whole universe at that moment.

I pulled her into my lap. She gasped, drawing her knees up and sitting on me more or less side saddle. I saw she was considering a protest. I smothered her with another kiss, and her reluctance melted away like the morning dew under a midday sun.

My hand slid down to cup her glorious bottom. I'd been staring at her sweet ass all night, well evidenced in the sheath dress. I loved the way it hugged her body like a second skin. Her generous curves were on display.

I never understood those guys who wanted to cover up theirwomen. That was like owning a Maserati or a Shelby Cobra and keeping it under a tarp all the time when you drove it. I liked showing her off to the world. I felt a swell of pride at the idea that everyone thought I'd tamed the tigress on my arm.

She moaned when I kissed her neck. I ravished her tender flesh with kisses and luscious licks. I loved everything about her, even the taste of her sweat. It reminded me of when I'd drank in the ambrosia of her pussy on that perfect, fiery night on the airplane.

Amanda clutched at me, her fingers pressing furrows into the sleeves of my tailored blazer. I stroked my hand down the back of her silken mane and then kissed my way back up to her lips. Amanda gasped, then splayed her thighs, hiking up her skirt until she sat fully on my lap facing me. I kissed her deep, thoroughly taking what was mine.

She ground her hips against me, rubbing the growing bulge in my trousers with her panty-clad pussy. I could feel the heat emanating through them, even through three layers of fabric. Her soft breasts pressed into my chest, reminding me of her femininity and making me feel that much more like a man.

The limo rolled to a stop. We were home. Parked right outside the manor. My driver knew better than to come and open the door, however. He just kept the engine running and took a conveniently timed cigarette break.

Amanda and I showed no signs of stopping. I devoured her, ravishing her neck and lips with kisses. I loved the feel of her skin against my own. She ran her fingers through my hair, letting out soft cries and deep, guttural moans.

“Amanda,” I cried. “Amanda, my darling.”

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I didn't know where that came from. It just sort of spurted out of me. Abruptly, Amanda gasped and pulled away from me.

"I... we shouldn't be doing this. It's not right."

"What?" I said, utterly flabbergasted. I thought we were a go forsex. It seemed inevitable that's where we were headed, either in the bedroom or right there in the back seat of the limo.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she repeated in a monotone. She hiked her dress back down and sidled over to the door, opening it herself. I watched as she vanished inside the manor house, taking the steps quickly despite her towering heels.

I sat there, blinking in confusion for a moment, utterly bewildered that she just kept defying me. I'd never had a woman resist me before.

I opened the door and followed her with a careful, measured stride. My mind grappled with what had just happened. I followed her path through the manor until I reached her bedroom door. It was closed tight, but I saw light shining from underneath. I somehow knew she was still awake.

I reached for the knob, and then I froze. I started thinking about what my next move was. I get in, and then what? Try to force her to like me, to respect me, to want me?

I turned, doing an about-face and headed back down the hallway. I passed by my own bedroom and just kept going to the recreational wing of the manor. A minute later I entered the gym and stalked toward the heavy bag, intent on beating out some

frustrations.

I eschewed the glove and hit the bag barehanded. The last time I'd done that, I'd stripped away a layer of skin and had to wear a bandage for a few days. I was too lost in the corridors of my own mind to care.

I couldn't stop thinking about Amanda. What was it about her that drove me so fucking nuts? How had she so suddenly, and unexpectedly, managed to get under my skin?

It was a hard pill to swallow, but I had to be brutally honest with myself. And the truth was that I was borderline obsessed with Amanda.

Even though she was only my fake, pretend wife, she'd grown closer to me than anyone else in my life. That is, sometimes she acted that way. Other times she was the most distant woman I'd ever known. Every other woman I'd ever been with had always done whatever I wanted them to.

I beat away on the heavy bag, sweating in my suit and not caring in the slightest. I felt the sting in my hands and knew I was probably raw and bleeding, but it didn't compare to the pain I felt in my chest.

Amanda was so damn distant. I wanted her to sleep with me again, in both meanings of the word. I wanted her... I guessed I just wanted her.

I couldn't put my finger on why. I mean, she was gorgeous. Of course, she was gorgeous. But she wasn't the only gorgeous woman in the world. Just the only one I really wanted.

So, if it wasn't looks, what was it? It sure wasn't because she was pliable or easily manipulated. In fact, I respected the hell out of Amanda for the fact that she was not



easily controlled. I admired her for it, too.

I realized, as I beat my hands into bloody oblivion, that I admired a lot of things about Amanda. I admired her passion, the way she'd do anything to save the stupid rainforest. I admired her moxie, her willpower, and her intelligence. I admired the way she so skillfully coordinated those huge charity events and made sure everything happened at just the right time, in just the right place.

I admired her for sticking to her guns. I realized she was right, it was a fake marriage. I shouldn't have taken it personally that she forgot her wedding ring. I mean, as an employee she'd certainly fulfilled most of her obligations in a stunningly competent fashion.

I could hardly complain about her performance, if I were being objective. She'd smoothly handled a couple of situations at the movie premiere that I'd nearly botched with my surliness. Amanda had it all. Beauty, brains, and real gumption to stick to her convictions no matter what.

That's when it hit me why I couldn't get her off my mind. Why I felt so damn obsessed with her. It wasn't that I liked her, though I did. A whole hell of a lot.

It was that I wanted her to like me.

It had always been a given before that woman liked me. I never had to worry about being liked before. But this time I had to earn her affection.

I wanted her to want me. That silly classic rock song had come to be all too poignant to me out of nowhere. I didn't want to force Amanda to be with me. I wanted her to want to be with me of her own free will.

I'd been trying to force her into it the whole time. That wasn't working. It took me a

moment to realize that I'd been trying to force her into it because that was the only way I knew how to get things done.

Picking up my pieces on the chessboard and moving them where I wanted them to be for my entire life. Only now I couldn't pick up the rogue queen and move her. Only the rogue queen could move the rogue queen.

I had no experience in how to make the rogue queen move toward me instead of away from me. But I knew that I had to put an end to this situation one way or another.

One thing became totally clear. I had an epiphany and stopped hitting the heavy bag.

I turned around and pulled my phone out of the suit jacket pocket. Blood from my busted knuckles ruined the expensive garment but I didn't care. I unlocked the screen and called Jenna's number.

I knew that something had to change. I could not keep going on with Amanda the way that I had been.

Jenna picked up almost immediately.

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“Jenna, since you’re working late, I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything you want, sir,” she said.

“Just a little thing and you can punch out for the day, as it were. I need you to get me the list.”

She paused for a second.

“The list, sir?”

“The list of celebrities and influencers we had as potential wives for me. I need to look it over. Immediately.”

### Chapter 14

Amanda

I awoke with a start, suspicious at how bright the sunlight was as it wafted through my bedroom windows. It was late. Like, really late. I was late for the stupid breakfast appointment with my fake husband.

I rolled out of bed and stepped into the bathroom. I stared at myself in the mirror and grimaced. I looked a mess. I had done a poor job of removing my makeup from the night before, and some of it had smeared along my brow ridge. My hair looked like I’d rolled around in a briar patch and then took a long walk through a stiff breeze.

I just couldn't summon up the gumption to make myself prettier. I washed off my face and pulled my hair back into a bun, but that was about it. Oh, and I rinsed with some mouthwash and spat it into the sink. No need to wilt the flowers on the dining room table with my breath.

I wrapped a robe around myself and belted it tight, then put my feet into my comfy slippers. They had been a wedding gift, one of hundreds. The interior was some kind of fleece, and it just sucked the tension right out of my feet when I wore them.

I walked out into the hallway, my disheveled appearance a stark contrast to the opulent and pristinely disciplined manor. I came around a corner and found a pair of maids struggling to move a big vase so they could dust behind it.

"Oh, hey Maria, Rebecca. Can I give you a hand there?"

They looked up worriedly.

"That won't be necessary, Mrs. Jones," Maria said. "Nor would it be proper."

"Proper-schmoper," I said, grasping the glazed enameled rim of the vase. Those suckers were heavy as all get out, but with my added strength we managed to wobble it out of the way.

"There you go."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jones."

"Oh, for God's sake, Rebecca, call me Amanda. I don't like the ring of Mrs. Jones."

"Whatever you say, Mrs. J—that is, Amanda."

I smiled and figured it was close enough for now. I continued on my way to the dining room, passing through a sun-dappled hallway with glass walls on the eastern side. The morning sun tinted the sculpted shrubbery animals holding court on the lawn. I liked the horse the best. The rabbits just made me think of Monty Python in all the wrong ways. Besides, there was no sense of scale. The artists had sculpted the rabbit to be the same size as a horse rearing back on its hind legs. What kind of monster rabbits did they have growing up? Did they go to Three-Mile Island High?

I nearly bumped into the head butler, Chavez. He was a portly man with close-cropped hair and an exquisitely sculpted pencil-thin mustache.

“Good morning, Mrs. Jones. Lovely day, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“For God’s sake, Chavez, please stop talking to me like I’m royalty, I waited tables a couple of years ago. And don’t call me Mrs. Jones. It’s Mandy, or if you must, Amanda.”

“Very well, Amanda. Will you be joining Mr. Jones in the dining room for breakfast this morning?”

“Sure. I’m surprised he’s still there.”

I had a sinking feeling in my gut. I hadn’t been expecting to run into him in the dining room so late. I was hoping he’d moved on with his day. I was expecting a lecture when I arrived at the dining room about being late, about the way I looked, pretty much about everything.

Plus, there was the fact that we’d damn near done it in the back of the limo the previous night. That was going to make for an awkward breakfast all on its own.

I passed the last arch to the dining room. The fact that I had to walk farther from my

bedroom to the dining room than I used to walk to school was not lost on me. When I entered the palatial dining room, I was struck by the elegance all over again. The walls were covered with glazed walnut wood paneling, interspersed with Doric pillars of white marble.

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The room might have been dark with all of that wood—the table matched the walls in hue—but there were no less than three chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Also, the eastern wall featured a curved window the entire length of the room. During the morning, it was bathed in gentle light.

I saw that Evan sat in his favorite chair by the window, a cup of coffee steaming near his left hand, and a cigar smoking in his right. His empty plate indicated he'd been there for some time. Well, of course he had. Evan was always on time.

I prepared internally for my coming chastisement. Evan always rode me hard about being late for anything, even something as simple as breakfast. I'd learned not to try and offer excuses because those just made him angrier. I didn't think it was as big a deal as all of that.

He did, though, which led to a lot of conflict.

He glanced up at me, his devilishly handsome face drawn into an inscrutable mask of neutrality.

"Good morning, Amanda," he said in a cordial, but still sort of neutral tone.

"Good morning," I replied cautiously, pulling out my chair. A servant had a plate of food in front of me before I even settled in. Strawberry scones with a side of ham in a truffle glaze, and grilled asparagus. My belly rumbled at the sight, but I didn't want to start eating until he'd had his go at me.

I waited, but he didn't say anything. No chastisement for being late. No sudden

barrage of names and dates and times for our busy itinerary. Just us occupying the same room with him giving me space. I wasn't used to that at all.

I figured it was some kind of trap. He was trying to lull me into a false sense of security so he could spring something on me.

I didn't want to fall into any carefully laid traps. As the moments stretched on in relative silence, I tried to eat my breakfast and ignore my mounting anxiety.

I kept trying to figure out what was wrong. I ate most of the ham—the glaze was exquisite—and a couple of the asparagus, but scones always felt kind of heavy in my stomach. I was too worried to have anything so substantial inside me.

“Okay,” I said at last when I couldn't stand it a moment longer. “What's going on?”

He looked up from his tablet and offered a thoughtful frown. “What do you mean by that? I don't know how to answer that question. I need more context.”

“Here's your context. I was almost half an hour late for breakfast, and you haven't said shit about it. You haven't deluged me with our itinerary and photo ops for the day. So, what's going on? Are you setting me up for something or what?”

For a moment, Evan looked different. He almost seemed weary. Not physically tired, but soul weary.

“Amanda, this is tough enough for me as it is. Please don't make it harder. I'm not used to acting this way.”

I think my jaw fell to the floor so hard it broke right on through to the basement. I started wondering if he'd been killed in his sleep and replaced with a robot. Or something equally improbable. All of those wild theories dancing through my head



made more sense to me than the Iceman suddenly thawing and revealing a human heart beating in his chest.

I cautiously decided to try and press my luck. I had no idea what would happen if I did, but I really wanted to try.

“Ah,” I said, but my voice broke. I took a sip of coffee to give myself time to recover. I should mention that the coffee was some of the best I’d ever had. The head chef actually roasted and flavored the beans himself and only ground them minutes before brewing every pot.

“What is it?” he asked, his eyes focused on me with laser precision.

“I was wondering if it would be okay with you, um, if I were to leave the house for a while today.”

A wan smile found its way to his lips. He didn’t show his teeth, and it wasn’t very spirited, but it was there. A tiny smidge of warmth even made it to his eyes.

“You can leave the house if you want to. You don’t have to ask me permission to do that any longer.”

I nodded, utterly dumbstruck. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Was this the same man who accosted me in his restaurant, shutting the place down for an entire day just so he could vent his fury? The same man who blew a gasket that I forgot to wear my pretend wedding ring?

Again, I thought about sci-fi robots and pod people and Manchurian candidates. In the end, though, I had to admit the possibility that I had actually gotten through to him. Me, plain old Amanda, had gotten through the thick ice walls surrounding Evan Jones.

“Ah, can I take the limo?” I asked.

“Yes. You can consider the limousine at your disposal. My servants will let you know if there is ever a scheduling conflict, and you might wind up with the backup limousine.”

“You have a backup limo? How come I’ve never seen it?”

“It’s a big garage.”

He wasn’t kidding about that. You could fit an entire discount store inside of his damn garage. Of course, about half of the vehicles stored in there weren’t for driving. They were more museum pieces and bragging rights type of deals.

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I asked Chavez to prepare the limo for me, then went back to my room. I took a quick shower and got dressed, wondering what I would do with my newfound freedom. I thought about visiting Jennifer, or maybe getting together with Ramone and Jake.

I even thought about being totally selfish and making it a me-time sort of outing. Like maybe treating myself to a spa using Evan's credit card.

As I dressed, I reflexively put on my wedding ring. The same one I'd forgotten so easily now slid onto my finger without my even having to think about it. I stared at it and realized that I didn't have to wear it. Not for my solo outing.

I took it off, but then my finger just felt weird. I put it back on and my anxiety levels decreased. At least no paparazzi would spot me without it if I chose to wear the ring.

I picked out a purse and matched it to my peplum skirt and short-sleeved blouse before heading out the front door. As I walked down the shallow, elegant steps toward the circle drive and the waiting limo, I felt peculiar. I turned around and saw Evan staring at me through the foyer window. Our eyes met, and then he turned and walked away without changing expression.

The driver opened the door and smiled.

"Where to, Mrs. Jones?"

I touched the ring on my finger. It struck me that I didn't want to leave. I actually wanted to stay.

I wanted to stay at my fake home with my fake husband.

## Chapter 15

Amanda

Déjà vu all over again.

I sat in The Happy Trails Café in the early morning hours, sitting across from Jennifer. Her baby bump was just growing noticeable, if you knew to look for it. I sipped my caramel frap latte and savored the sweetness over my palate as I listened to Jennifer wrap up her story.

“So then, Ramone just walks up pretty as you please... no, not walking. He does this thing... you know that thing he does when he just kind of—”

“Saunters?”

“Yes, that’s it,” she said, snapping her fingers with a pop that seemed unnaturally loud in all but deserted café. “He just kind of saunters up and plops it down on the table.”

“The very thing?” I asked, my mouth agape.

“The very thing,” she said with a jubilant grin. “Then he just kind of looks around and does a sort of crotch chop and says ‘Boom, y’all looking for THIS?’”

I laughed heartily, the sound also unnaturally loud. After what had happened the last time I was in that particular café, I kept expecting my fake husband to appear out of nowhere and start yelling at me.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one.

"Oh," she said, holding her stomach.

"Your morning sickness again?" I asked with concern.

"Yes, indeed, but don't worry, I'm not going off to the bathroom or leaving this time."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because," she said with a wicked grin "I'm worried your fake husband might pop out of the woodwork and start acting all possessive again."

I laughed, but it trailed off into a sigh.

"Don't remind me. That was not a banner moment in our fake marriage, I'll tell you that much."

Jennifer considered me for a long moment as she blew steam off of her tea. She put the cup to her lips and took a delicate sip, possibly out of respect for her stomach. Relief spread over her face.

"You know, Marshall told me a slice of ginger in my tea would help with nausea, but I was dubious about it until now."

"It really helps?" I asked, also a bit dubious.

“Yes, it does.”

“Can’t you, you know, taste it, though? Isn’t it all gingery? I don’t like the idea of ginger in my tea. I only like ginger in ginger snaps and ginger ale.”

“What about that redhead guy you dated a couple of years ago? You liked that kind of ginger, if I recall.”

“Oh God,” I said with a laugh. “When he took off his pants, it looked like he had a strawberry patch below the waist. I just couldn’t take him seriously.”

She shook her head. “You’re so weird. Most women like the idea of a big red-haired highlander or Irishman to sweep them off their feet.”

“Ha-ha. Not this girl.”

“Mmm.” She sipped her tea again and looked a bit better. “I’m sorry that your fake husband acts like a possessive dickwad.”

“Actually, he’s been really good for the last few weeks, surprisingly.”

“He has?” she cocked her head to the side. “Are you talking about the same Evan Jones here?”

“Yeah. Go figure, but he’s been giving me my space as much as he can. I mean, I still get pulled all over the place for photo ops and such to keep growing his brand, but other than that, he tries to give me room to breathe. He’s not making me join him for

breakfast at an appointed hour any longer, and I don't have to ask his permission to leave the house."

"How did all of this come about? Was he visited by three ghosts in the night?"

"We, um, we had a fight. A pretty big one, because I forgot to wear my fake wedding ring to the movie premiere. He was acting like we were actually married, instead of fake married, so I told him where he could stuff that attitude."

I sighed as I recalled his angry face.

"And then he started throwing my contract in my face, saying that he owned me and all of this shit. I told him that I was his fake wife, not his slave, and that he wasn't giving me enough room to breathe."

"Wow. I take it he didn't like you saying that?"

I decided to just tell her everything.

"Well, he got all huffy about the wedding ring thing again. I asked him why he cared so much if it was all fake, anyway. Then, he... he grabbed me and kissed me. I mean fucking kissed me, stole my breath away and everything."

"Oh my," Jennifer said, her mouth forming an O.

"Yeah. Then he said something like 'is this real enough for you?' We started making out, like practically dry humping in the car."

"I've been there before," she said with a chuckle. "Good thing the back of a limo is so spacious. It allows for a lot of different positions."

I was on too much of a roll to laugh at her joke.

“I cut him off. It didn’t feel right for some reason, I don’t know. I retreated to my room, and then the next morning I’m super late for breakfast. I creep in there thinking he’s going to be a total prick about it. Instead, he didn’t even react. He’s been acting nicer ever since.”

“That’s incredible.” She shook her head. “I mean, really incredible. From what I understand, Evan’s reputation was even worse than Marshall’s. He’s even more ruthless and cold.”

“Sometimes, I get a glimmer from Evan that he’s not super cold. Sometimes he’s really warm. I mean, at the movie premiere we were showing off for the cameras. You know, hugging, kissing, hanging off of each other and all of that.”

“I saw the photos. You sure looked happy in some of those.”

“I felt happy in some of those,” I said with a sigh. “Anyway, he kept up the act even when no one was around. He kept trying to kiss on me and lick the back of my neck, which drives me absolutely fucking crazy.”

“Oh yeah, too many guys ignore the neck. I swear they have a map ingrained in their head that goes ‘lips, tits, pussy’ in that order.”

I laughed and then sipped my latte, only to find it empty. One of the waiters magically appeared and refilled it, offering a discreet smile to go with the discreet service.

“I’ve never gotten this good of service anywhere.”

“You’re the owner’s wife, what do you expect? They’d probably throw themselves



down on a puddle for you so you wouldn't get your feet wet.”

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“That makes no sense. How would I walk over a squishy, lumpy human body in heels? It would be a lot easier to just step over or go around the puddle.”

“It’s just a figure of speech, hon, don’t read so much into it.”

She reached out and put a hand on top of my glass. “And maybe dial back on the caffeine.”

“Some of us aren’t pregnant and can have all the lattes they want,” I said, snatching my drink from her clutches. “Here’s the thing, though. As much as he keeps giving me space, I really don’t want to leave home all that much. I like spending time with my fake husband when he’s being, well, human.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, he’s even become interested in the charity work we do. He’s helped me work on our event planning and other projects.”

“Oh, I see. Is that why Jenna’s been spending so much time sitting in on our meetings? She’s been chumming around with both Ramone and Jake.”

I felt a bit miffed. I didn’t want to lose my friends to little miss-perfect-computer-brain.

“I see. I had no idea I was so replaceable.”

“No one could ever replace you, hon.”

My phone dinged with a particular tone. I quickly dug it out of my purse.

“Who in the world is so important that you put down your latte to answer them?”

“It’s just my husband. We have a charity brunch event for the Audubon Society later this week, and he’s probably just texting to remind me.”

I opened the text and found it was indeed just that. I noticed Jennifer looking at me rather intensely.

“What?” I said, closing down my phone.

“You just called Evan ‘my husband,’ didn’t you?”

My cheeks flushed with heat.

“I might have, but don’t read too much into it. It’s, um, complicated.”

“It was complicated when we met for breakfast last week, and the week before. But you never once referred to him as ‘my husband.’ It was always Evan or ‘my fake husband.’”

“What are you saying, it was a Freudian slip?”

“Was it?”

I groaned in frustration and rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

“You’re impossible.”

“No, I’m Jennifer,” she said smoothly. “Amanda, tell me, how do you really feel

about him?”

I looked her in the eye and knew I couldn't lie.

“Sometimes, I forget the fake part. You know? Like we're just going about our business, going about our day, and for a little bit I'll forget that it's all fake. I'll forget that I'm just playing a role.”

I dropped my gaze to my latte. It didn't need stirring, but I did it anyway, the metal of the spoon sliding against the glass cup.

“It feels good to be next to him. To be living with him. Even when he tries to push me into something, it feels like he's doing it because he cares. Even if he's expressing it the wrong way, he still cares.”

I looked up and swallowed, hard.

“Is it out of the realm of possibility that maybe, just maybe, a man like him could really be interested in a nobody like me?”

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Before she could answer, the doors to the café burst open. I half expected a jealous tirade from Evan, because that's what happened last time. Instead, three figures came through. The rotund bowling pin shape of Jake, the sauntering easy glide of Ramone, and of all people Jenna, my fake husband's personal assistant. They were all talking and joking together like oldfriends.

When they saw us, they made a beeline for the table.

"Oh, here you are," Jennifer said, "almost on time."

"Hey, Amanda. I hope you're enjoying yourself, sitting around and sipping lattes while Jake and I are busting our balls."

I chuckled. "Nice to see you too, Ramone."

"Well, much as I don't like his salty language so early in the morning," Jake said, "we really are working harder without you around, Amanda. I can't wait until you come back."

"Yeah," Ramone said. "If you don't come back soon, we might just quit and go back to work in a restaurant. Or maybe even go to work in this café."

He looked around and nodded to himself. "I'm sure they could use an experienced line order cook."

While the two of them bantered about, I noticed that Jenna had unsnapped her briefcase on an adjacent table. She took out several folders, each one color-coded and

labeled with a typed, printed sticker.

One of the documents bore a title page called Project Next Level. I wondered what it was. I'd never even heard of that, and Evan was pretty consistent in telling me about his various business ventures. He wanted to make sure I could field questions about them from the press and sound halfway intelligent.

"Say, Jenna?"

"Yes?" she asked without looking up.

"What's Project Next Level all about? It sounds rather intense."

Jenna snatched the file off the table and stowed it back into her briefcase so quickly I felt like if I'd blinked, I'd have missed it.

"It's nothing," she said nervously. "It's just a work in progress, more of an idea than a project, really."

She looked up at me with a smile that seemed strained.

"It's going to be quite a surprise for you when I'm finished preparing it, though."

## Chapter 16

Amanda

I had my shoes off, and sat on the edge of his desk, my legs crossed demurely because I wore a skirt. My laptop was open beside me, and I worked on it while he typed on his own a short distance away, sitting in an actual chair. I had a seat available to me, but I kind of liked sitting on the desk.

Besides, it felt good to be so near to him.

“So,” I said, staring at my screen even though I was addressing him. I noticed Evan perked up in my peripheral vision. “Are you sure that you can get Steve Martin and Martin Short to show up for this charity ball I’m throwing? Because I really don’t want to even mention it to anyone until it’s a done deal.”

He looked up at me, his brows climbing high on his face.

“It’s a done deal. When Martin lost his savings in the great financial crash a few years back, I helped him rebuild it to even higher levels than before. And my mother is Martin’s number one fan. She bakes him a pecan pie every time he comes to one of my shindigs.”

“Shut up,” I said, laughing. I punched a few keys on my laptop and then rubbed my hand across my eyes. I’d been staring at a screen for far too long.

I shut down the computer and folded up the laptop. At almost the same time, my fake husband did so as well. We kind of looked over at each other and realized we were both done for the day at the same time.

That didn’t happen all that often.

I didn’t want to leave his presence. I wanted to stay near him longer. Without really thinking about it, I spoke.

“Would you like to join me for a late dinner?”

He perked right up.

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“Sure,” he said, checking his watch. His face contorted into a frown. “Although I’m not aware of any restaurants open this late. Not any that I would find palatable.”

“What, you’re too good for Waffle House?”

“Isn’t everyone?”

Now he had me there. Not just that he made a good point, but he made me laugh, too.

“I’ll inform the chef,” he said, reaching for the house phone.

“Hey, hold up a bit.” I put my hand on top of his own. “Don’t call Chef. It’s like super late and he’s probably with his family.”

He gave me a long look. “How are we going to have dinner if I don’t call the chef?”

“Uh, duh, we’ll make it ourselves. It’ll be fun.”

He shook his head. I could see him sulling up and getting stubborn on me again. I felt a wave of anxiety come over me at the thought I’d set him off again.

“I don’t understand what the big deal is. It’s Chef’s job to cook for me when he is told to do so.”

I sighed, trying to come up with a way to get through to him. “Look, why don’t you try this—try thinking of Chef not just as a tool or a robot you can click and order around. Try to think of him as a human being.”



I slid off the desk, which hiked my skirt up a little. I noticed his gaze dropping to my exposed thighs for the brief moment between when my feet touched the floor, and I pulled down the skirt.

He cocked an eyebrow as I walked around behind him and covered his eyes.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m helping you find your humanity, Uncle Scrooge.”

He scoffed, but he didn’t pull my hands away. I took that as a victory.

“Now, for a moment, pretend like you aren’t Evan Jones, fabulously wealthy business mogul.”

“Okay, who am I? Conan the Barbarian? Is this a role-playing thing? Do you want me to throw you over my shoulder and tie you to the bed or something?”

“You’re supposed to be Chef, you horny bastard,” I said with a laugh. “Picture yourself as Chef. You’ve worked all day, literally, preparing three meals for your ultra-demanding, kind of a prick boss—”

“Hey,” he said, but I didn’t stop.

“Now you’ve finally put your kids to bed, and you’ve just laid down yourself. You snuggle up next to your wife and you prepare to fall into a well-deserved slumber.”

I could feel him sort of relaxing into the idea. Once I had him lulled into a false sense of security, I pulled my hands away.

“Ring ring!” I said loudly in his ear. “Ring ring! It’s your boss, calling you because

he wants you to come and make him a super late dinner. So, you roll out of bed, put your clothes back on, drive back to the manor house—”

“Okay, okay, I get your point.”

He put the phone back down.

“Anyway, this is like a thing that married people do. They cooktogether.”

He glanced up at me sharply. I felt my cheeks burning.

“That is, we can turn this experience into something we can tell reporters. Maybe even an Instagram story or other social media post.”

Now I was really speaking his language. I believed his pupils turned into dollar signs for a moment, but it was really late, and I had eye strain.

“Maybe you’re right.” He rubbed his eyes for a moment, a rare sign of being a human being, and stood up. “I’m sure we can muddle through our own dinner somehow.”

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He moved toward the door as I looked around for my shoes. I couldn't remember what I'd done with them. As I searched, I noticed a folder on his desk that read Project Next Level. My curiosity piqued, but I didn't want to just paw through it right in front of him.

I found my shoes over by the fireplace, and together we went down to the kitchen. He opened up cabinets for a few minutes, staring like he was deep in thought, but I knew he was really confused.

"It's been a long time since you cooked for yourself, hasn't it, dear?" I teased.

"Yes. I would imagine it's been a while for you as well."

"Well, I was never a chef or a maestro in the kitchen. However, Ramone and the other chefs at the restaurant showed me a few things. I'm sure we can whip up something."

I checked the pantry and the cupboards, and my lord was there a ton of food there. I couldn't believe our options, but at the same time it was late, and I wanted to do something simple. Something we could accomplish together.

"I'm thinking we've got mushrooms, we've got butter, thick cream, and this bag of tortellini. We've got everything we need to do a kick-ass pasta with creamy mushroom sauce."

"If you say so," he said, sounding a bit dubious.

“I say so.”

He allowed me to take the lead, which surprised the hell out of me.

“Now, look in that hanging wire basket and tell me if you see any garlic bulbs.”

He rummaged around without complaint until he came up with one.

“Will this do?”

“That’s perfect. Go ahead and grab an onion while you’re standing there.”

I cut a thick slab of grass-fed European butter and flopped it into a saucepan. I gestured to one of the cast iron pots on the wall.

“Hey, take that down and fill it with water, about three inches from the top.”

“That seems like a lot of water for a small amount of pasta.”

“Trust me, tortellini are going to expand like crazy, and some of the cheese is going to get into the water. You’ll want that extra volume, so the pasta doesn’t get a coat of slime.”

“All right.”

I showed him how to crack open the skin of a garlic clove, and the right way to dice an onion for a soup. I was no Gordon Ramsey, but I probably looked like an expert to him.

Once we had the mushrooms, onions, and garlic good and sauteed in the butter, I added the cream in by degrees until we had a rich, brown sauce.

We poured it over the pasta and sat down to eat at the counter. I do believe that Evan had a lot of fun. Plus, you always appreciate food more when you have a hand in its creation.

“Thank you,” I said as he stuck his fork into the morass on his plate.

“For what?”

“For making the effort. For listening to me and not giving me a hard time when I told you how to do something in the kitchen.”

He shrugged. “I try to listen to experts, even if I don’t always agree with them. Besides, it was a lot of fun. I’m kind of surprised that I enjoyed it so much, to tell you the truth.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said as I bit into the tortellini. It was perfect, the sauce mellowing out the saltiness of the cheese stuffing. “Well, maybe you should let me be in charge more often.”

He gave me a long look and then grinned.

“I don’t know. I might need more convincing that this is a good idea.”

I put down my fork and came around the table. I kissed him first for a change.

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“How’s that for convincing?” I teased.

He grinned and put his arms around my waist. I slid into his lap, straddling him like I had in the limo. Our lips met as I undid his necktie.

I slipped it from around his neck, then tossed it around my own. I smiled as I undid his top button. He smelled so good, and his kisses were fire, as always.

He kissed my neck, and I gasped sharply. I ground myself on his lap. My hand worked its way down between us and undid his belt.

Evan shifted on the seat, enabling me to undo his trousers. I fumbled his big, thick cock out of his underwear, pulling it out. I lifted my hips and started trying to work my panties off with one hand.

“Would you like me to give you a hand with those?” he asked as if he were the employee and I the employer.

“Yes, please,” I said, laughing as I used one hand braced on his shoulder to keep my balance.

“Okay. Whatever you say.”

He slid his hand up my hip, sending goose bumps along my flesh. Then he hooked his finger in the waistband of my panties and jerked his hand back. I gasped as my panties tore off me with a sharp ripping sound.

“There you go,” he said.

I lifted myself up into the air and slid back down onto his cock. I gaped as it slid deeply within me. My eyes fluttered closed at the sharp pinch as I settled fully upon his throbbing rod.

“I feel so full,” I gasped. His mouth was on my neck, and I clasped my arms around him. My mouth flew open in a deep moan as he mauled my neck.

I started gyrating my hips, swiveling about like a stripper. I’d never done this before. Taken the initiative during our lovemaking. He seemed to enjoy it. I writhed around on his lap, building toward the crescendo of a truly massive climax.

I let out a sharp cry as golden fireworks exploded behind my eyelids. My pussy clamped down on him with quick, tight convulsions. He came inside of me, filling me with his sticky seed.

I collapsed against him, resting my forehead on his shoulder. We filled the air with our heavy pants as our sweat mingled and cooled.

“That,” he said between pants. “Was the best meal I’ve ever had. Maybe there’s something to this domestic life after all.”

## Chapter 17

Evan

“Ta-da,” she said, removing the blindfold and grandly gesturing at a sleek, brand-new yacht. It featured the perfect combination of luxury and sport, with the ability to go into a hydrofoil mode as well as all the amenities one would come to expect from a luxury yacht.

At least, that's what the salesman told me when I bought the damn thing.

"Amanda, honey?" I spoke.

"What?"

"This is my yacht."

"Well, it's not like I have a bunch of yachts laying around." She smacked me on the shoulder. "Stop being a bore and just enjoy the fact that I've arranged for us to spend some time together on the deep blue sea."

It did sort of sound nice. Hitting the waves with her at my side.

"All right, I'm all in. There's just one thing I don't understand, though."

"And what's that?" she asked.

"How on Earth did you manage to arrange for the limo, the yacht, and the driver without me knowing about it?"

She blew air out of her lips, stirring her bangs.

"Oh, I think that you'll find if you treat your people like actual human beings instead of tools or automatons, they're more than willing to bend the rules to help you."



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I took her at face value and then followed her up the gangplank. It was a damn fine yacht, and I so rarely got to take her out onto the waves.

I led the way once we got on board. I thought that a drink was in order, so I showed her the bar.

She sat on a stool and smiled as I mixed us up a pitcher of Tom Collins. I then proceeded to pour us both a glass. It felt so safe, so normal. Like we were a real married couple just enjoying ourselves and each other's company. Rather than a pair of charlatans pulling one over on the world so they could reap the benefits in the form of stock value and net worth.

After that night in the kitchen we began spending more and more time together, even outside of work. Now it felt so natural that I didn't resist too much when she said that she had a surprise for me and that I would have to go with her blindfolded.

After we had a drink or two, I led her up to the main deck and got behind the wheel.

"Have you ever driven a yacht before?" I asked.

"I've rarely even been on a yacht before. A couple of times, usually for a charity event. Jennifer and Marshall have a couple of them, but there never seems to be any time."

"Well, there's time today. Let me show you how to use the throttle..."

I took the yacht out onto the waves. It was a beautiful day, the oceans almost

perfectly calm. Perfect yachting weather. It was great, just being with her like a normal married couple.

“Okay, I’m going to take us up on the hydrofoils,” I said. “You might want to sit down.”

She settled into a chair, and I pulled the hammer back. The yacht launched forward, rising up out of the water onto the foils. We skimmed along the smooth ocean surface like a bug on a pond.

She laughed exultantly, her hair flying behind her, catching the rays of the sun. I wanted to kiss her badly in that moment. I steered us around on the foils for a while, and then let back on the throttle, letting the hull settle back onto the water again.

I showed her down to the lower deck, where the sun splashed the polished timbers with their mirror-like sheen. She went to the rail on the aft deck and looked out back the way we had come.

“I can’t even see the shore anymore.”

“Does that bother you?” I asked.

“No,” she said, turning back to me. “It kind of feels like we have the whole ocean all to ourselves like this.”

She turned back to look out over the waves. I eyed her perfect bottom and her shapely legs as her dress hiked up when the wind caught it.

I stepped up behind her, letting her feel the growing bulge in my crotch. She giggled and rubbed her bottom against me.

I reached up under her skirt and stroked my fingers across her panty-clad pussy. She let out a sharp cry and started to turn around.

“No,” I said, pushing her back down to lean on the rail. “Stay how you are. Put your hands on the rail and keep them there.”

She laughed softly.

“Yes, sir,” she said, and this time it wasn’t the least bit mocking.

I pulled the blindfold out of my pocket and leaned in close to tie it around her eyes. This rubbed my cock against her ass. She wriggled against me, still keeping her hands on the railing.

“You have a fantastic ass,” I said as I caressed her smooth cheeks.

“Thank you, sir,” she said between heavy pants.

“I think I want to see it.”

I hiked up her skirt, tucking the bottom hem into the back of her dress. Then I tugged her panties down to her knees, then to her ankles. This put my face in close proximity to her luscious behind. I kissed the pliant flesh, then bit her playfully.

She squealed, not from pain because I didn’t bite that hard, but from surprise.

“You’re so bad,” she said.

“Yes, but when I’m feeling bad, it makes you feel so good, doesn’t it?”

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I gave her ass a firm spank when she didn't answer.

"I asked you a question, Amanda."

"Yes, sir," she said breathlessly. "It feels so good."

I pried her ass cheeks apart and stared at the dripping wet pink trench between her wide-open pussy lips. She was so ready for me. Ready to have me inside of her, but I wanted to tease her a bit. Turnabout was fair play, after all.

I slipped two of my fingers easily inside of her from behind. She cried out as I gently wormed them up to the last knuckle.

"Your pussy is so warm and slippery for me."

"Yes, sir," she gasped.

"I bet you're really close to coming right now, aren't you?"

I used my free fingers to rub her swollen clit. Her cries grew sharper in pitch, more urgent as I worked her pussy over inside and out.

"Yes, sir," she said, her voice quivering like a leaf in the wind.

"Well, you're not allowed to come unless I say so. You have to ask me for permission. Do you understand?"

“Oooh,” she moaned as I slid my fingers around inside of her luscious pussy. “Yes, sir.”

I thrust my fingers in and out like a cock, worming another one in with the first two. I leaned over her and kissed the back of her neck, pleasuring her pussy with my fingers. When I nibbled her earlobe, she cried out over the deep blue sea.

“Oh fuck! Can I come yet?”

“No,” I said.

She let out a long, whimpering moan and shivered against me. She ground herself against my fingers, growing more and more desperate.

“Oh God, let me come, please,” she cried.

“Not yet.”

“You’re such a priiiiick,” she cried.

“Did you just come?”

“No,” she gasped.

“You better not have, or I’ll have to spank you.”

She let out a long, undulating moan.

“Please,” she groaned, grinding herself on my fingers. “Please let me come.”

“In a minute,” I said. “Now, when I tell you to come, I want you to say something

really, really dirty. Understand?”

“Yes,” she cried.

“All right, come!”

“Oh God! Fuck my dirty pussy!”

Her body shivered and her cry pierced the calm sound of the ocean waves. Amanda half-collapsed against the railing, her legs trembling as if they struggled to bear her weight.

“Okay,” I said, honoring her request. I stood up and undid my fly, then pulled her up by the hips until she stood straight enough for my entry.

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She thrust her bottom up in the air, and I pushed the head of my cock into her dripping wet pussy. I cried out as she convulsed, drawing my cock in even further. I thrust into her, my fingers digging into the pliant, supple flesh covering her sweetly curved hips.

Our mutual cries of passion echoed out over the waves. The sunlight felt good on our bare skin, and I had never felt so free and energized during sex in my entire life.

Later, we cuddled in my cabin, her naked form draped over me. I was surprised at how good it felt to have her with me, in mind and spirit as well as body.

All I had to do to get there was to stop trying to get her. I started to think, the wheels in my mind turning like crazy.

What if the only way for things to get even better was to let her go?

One way or another, our marriage had to end.

## Chapter 18

Amanda

The golden beams of sunshine splashed across the kitchen table and my back as I perched on the counter. I held a steaming mug of coffee in one hand and a half-eaten everything bagel in the other.

“How’s your bagel?” Evan asked from nearby. He sat in the chair adjacent to the

counter.

“Oh, it’s quite good. How’s yours?”

He gave me a smoldering look. “It’s palatable enough, but I prefer what I had to eat when we first woke up.”

A thrill tickled down my spine. I uncrossed my legs slowly and recrossed them, flashing my pussy in the process. I wore only one of his old shirts.

“Well, you could always have more of that for dessert, you know.”

He reached up and put his soft palm on my bare thigh. He stroked his hand up and sent chills down my spine.

“I’d love nothing more than to do just that. But I’ve got to head out for the shareholder’s meeting in less than four minutes.”

He checked his phone and grunted.

“Make that two and a half.”

He devoured the rest of his bagel. I stared at my own and set it on the plate with a sigh. My coffee cup joined the bagel as I slid down to put my bare feet on the floor.

He noticed my sigh and turned a puzzled gaze my way. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “I think I’m supposed to ask you that question, Evan.”

His eyes narrowed to slits. “What’s that supposed to mean, exactly?”



“It means you’ve been acting funny all morning. Ever since the great start we had, you’ve been growing more and more distant.”

I could see the wheels turning in his eyes. For a long moment, I thought maybe I’d pushed him too far, and he was going to shut down or even leave the table. He could have just walked out the door for his oh-so-important-meeting.

Instead, his stoic mask slipped off of his handsome face. An all too human look of fear and regret crossed his features instead.

“Okay,” he said, heaving a long sigh. “All right. I’ll just come out and say it. This...”

He gestured between the two of us.

“You and me, this is all new to me.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of new for me, too.”

“No, you don’t understand and.” He shook his head, eyes growing dark. “I just... I’m not explaining this very well, am I?”

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“No, you’re not.” I crossed my arms over my chest and pouted. “The way you’re acting is starting to worry me, Evan. I don’t like this at all.”

“Look,” he said, wiping his hand down his face. He seemed weary again. Tired of pretending, maybe. I didn’t know. “I just don’t know how else to say this. This thing between us is new to me, and it’s overwhelming. All right? It’s overwhelming.”

He looked at me with a deep sadness in his eyes.

“You’ve proven me wrong on so many things. I never expected that when I arranged this fake marriage. I wasn’t expecting a lot of things...”

His voice trailed off, and his gaze snapped to the side. I wondered where he was going with it.

“Hey.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “What’s up?”

“I’m just saying, you taught me that treating people like, well, people, instead of just objects, and using my celebrity status to do good, and that sometimes letting go of control leads to better results and it really got me thinking.”

He put his hand on top of my own and gazed into my eyes.

“Amanda, I need time to come to terms with, well, me. You understand?”

“I think so.”

He stood up, and I kissed him goodbye. Then I handed him his briefcase and phone and walked him to the door.

He walked down toward the limo, then stopped at the last moment. He turned back to me.

“Goodbye, Amanda.”

“Goodbye, Evan.”

I wondered at the strange sense of finality in his words. As the door shut, I started to go over our last conversation in my mind.

I realized what it all meant. He really cared about me. He really, truly did. I couldn't believe how I'd run around being so stupid, thinking he was out of my league.

He'd let his guard down and shown me his human side. For once, his super billionaire alpha male mask had slipped, and I'd seen the real person behind the Iceman persona.

I wondered about what Jennifer had told me about Marshall. That she hadn't really changed him. That all she'd done was help him draw out the kind and loving person lurking deep inside to the surface.

Was that what I was doing with my fake husband? Drawing out the inner chewy nougat of goodness from within him? Or was I just seeing what I wanted to see? Believing what I wanted to believe?

I dismissed the idea summarily. He was showing me his real face now. There was no manipulation on his part. I could tell that these feelings were genuine. He had to come to terms with the fact that he now had genuine emotions, and he had to learn how to express them.

The thing was, he did a great job of expressing his feelings for me when he stopped trying so hard to be an island. We got along in an effortless, soothing way that allowed for plenty of sparks in and out of the bedroom, but only after he started easing up on me and showing his gentler side.

Rebecca and Maria showed up to clean up the dining room after our breakfast. Rebecca had music playing on her phone, heralding their arrival. When they saw that I was still in residence in the dining room, they startled and turned to leave.

“Sorry, Mrs... that is, Amanda. We’ll come back later.”

“No need. Come on back.”

I stood up from my spot so they could start the cleanup. Then I noticed she was playing *The Twist*. I remembered the song vaguely from a movie somewhere.

I started doing the dance, because I remembered that too and I was feeling light as a feather. Rebecca and Maria laughed in delight, and soon they joined in as well. The three of us twisted around the dining room, having a wonderful time. Chavez walked past the dining room door, then came back and did a double take.

His mouth was open in awe as he watched us having a splendid time. For a moment, I thought he was going to join us and start twisting his stately ass off. Instead, he gave a warm smile and continued on his way, humming the song under his breath.

The song ended, and I found myself breathless. I hugged both of them and then headed up to my room. I had work to do, after all. Then I remembered that I’d left my laptop in Evan’s bedroom. Lately, I’d been sleeping in there more often than not.

Or perhaps I should say, not sleeping in there more often than not.

I headed over to his side of the manor and entered the bedroom. The smell of sex hit my nostrils as soon as the door opened. I laughed under my breath, a bit of burn coming to my cheeks. I resolved to open a window or something before the household staff came to clean his chambers and discovered the scent of our mutual passions.

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I stared at the bed where we'd had sex not that long ago and chuckled. The sheets were still rumpled and messed up. I went over to one of his discarded shirts and held it to my body. I inhaled deeply around the collar and sighed, exulting in his scent.

I found my laptop sitting on the nightstand. I picked it up, humming the Twist under my breath, and went over to his baroque desk. I seated myself behind it, setting up my laptop on the glass countertop.

I waited for my computer to boot up, looking out the window. It certainly seemed like a gorgeous day. The sun was shining bright in a perfectly blue sky. The green leaves on the trees outside waved gently in the breeze, reflecting the golden light of the morning sun.

I pondered going for a little walk around the manor grounds, then decided against it. I did have a ton of work to do for the charity. The Amazon rainforest wasn't going to save itself, unfortunately. And I knew that if it went, then humanity might just go with it.

While I waited for the computer to finish going through all of its little boot-up operations, I happened to notice a thick manila file folder sitting face down on the desk. Out of idle curiosity, I picked up the folder and flipped it over so I could see the front.

Project Next Level. Again, with the Project Next Level. I noticed that the folder was significantly bigger than it had been the last time I saw it. I wondered what that meant.

I found myself opening the file folder before I even had time to think about it in detail. I wasn't really snooping. It was truly just the kind of bored curiosity a person engages in when they're stuck waiting for something to happen.

I figured that the project must have been close to completion, or the file folder wouldn't have been so thick. I thumbed past a few pages that looked to be extra copy paper and then stared at a gorgeous-looking red-haired woman's photo. I recognized her from somewhere, but I couldn't place exactly where.

I turned the page and found a dossier with a name at the top. It hit me where I'd seen the pretty redhead. She was an actress whose star was on the rise.

Curious, I kept thumbing through the files. One after another, I uncovered a woman's photo and a detailed dossier on her. Every single one of them was beautiful beyond comparison. Every single one of them was world famous for one thing or another.

As I went through the file, my heart sank. All these women were from the original list of candidates for the role of Evan's fake wife. All of a sudden I felt mighty stupid.

He wasn't trying to tell me he had feelings for me. He'd been beating around the bush about this. About Project Next Level.

Evan had compiled a list of celebrity women again for only one reason I could see. He was looking at them like items on a menu.

Why would a married man be looking at so many different women? Answer—he wasn't planning on staying married for very long.

I covered my face with my hands. I wanted to cry, but it was like the tears wouldn't come. I had been played for the fool quite well. Quite well indeed.

Project Next Level was all about finding my replacement. He was going to really divorce me out of our fake marriage. He was then going to pick a new candidate. Maybe one that was a lot less of a pain in the ass than me.

I was being replaced.

## Chapter 19

Amanda

“Amanda, what in the world is going on with you?”

My lips drew into a thin, tight line on my face. I drummed my fingers on the conference table. We were supposed to be discussing charity business, but obviously that was going to have to wait until I dealt with the inevitable fallout from my recent actions.

When I didn't answer Jennifer, she heaved a sigh and reached out to take my hand.

“It's okay, Amanda. You can confide in me. Please tell me what's going on?”

“We're trying to have a meeting, that's what's going on,” I replied. “Shouldn't we be discussing the upcoming charity ball in London? That's a lot more important, I think.”

“Not to me, it isn't. You're my friend, Amanda. We've been friends for a long time. Long before all of this. You can confide in me.”

“I'm not sure what you want me to say.”

“Maybe we could start with this—why did you run away from the mansion? Why



have you turned off your phone?”

“Because I’m trying to avoid dealing with Evan,” I said.

“He’s going crazy looking for you, you know. He’s called me and Marshall at least a dozen times in the last twenty-four hours. I haven’t told him anything except that I knew you were safe.”

“I appreciate that.”

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“You’re going to have to confront this sooner or later, you know.”

“No, I don’t know.” My voice sounded sullen and petulant, even to my ears. “I don’t have to deal with it. I can just go right back to living my normal life again. The life I had before I ever met Evan Jones.”

Jennifer cocked an eyebrow.

“Amanda, come on. Don’t even try to pretend like it’s going to be that easy.”

“Why shouldn’t it be easy?” I covered my face with my hands. “Please don’t tell Evan where I am. I switched off my phone so he couldn’t track me, all right? I just want to go back to the way things were.”

“You can’t just walk away from this. It’s going to have to be a more conscious uncoupling than that.”

“I can just walk away,” I said, a bit loudly as I jabbed my finger at her. I felt like I had a great point to make. One I had been just dying to get out of me. “I can totally walk away, Jennifer. I mean, you’re right. If...if this had been a real relationship, with a real wedding and a real marriage, I couldn’t just walk away. I’d have to do it a lot more messy than this. However!”

I held up my finger before she could cut me off.

“However, this is not a real relationship. It’s a fake marriage, and I’m a fake wife. Therefore, I can just make a clean break and walk right the fuck away from

everything that has anything to do with Evan Jones.”

Jennifer gazed at me for a long time and then reached out to cup her hand over my own.

“You know I’ll support you in whatever decision you make. I just want to make sure you understand exactly what you’re getting yourself into.”

“I understand what I’m getting myself out of,” I muttered.

She waited for me to explain myself for a bit. When I did not, she gently began to pry.

“You know, I thought that you and Evan were getting along a lot better. At least, that’s what Jenna said.”

“Jenna doesn’t know half as much as she thinks she does,” I snapped. “Yeah, we were getting along okay, I guess.”

Jennifer arched a brow. I heaved a long sigh.

“Okay, so it was more than just sort of okay. It was magical. It was great passionate sex at night and great companionship during the day. It was long hours in the office and long hours coming down from it later. I was liking it... maybe even loving that life, until it all came crashing down.”

“It came crashing down?”

I really did not want to give her the gory details. I really didn’t. All I wanted to do was to put Evan Jones out of my mind on a permanent basis. Wash that man right out of my hair, as it were.

“I let myself be duped, Jennifer. I duped myself, I should say.”

I hung my head between my hands and stared at the table. The wood had been polished to such a sheen I could see my reflection. I looked pretty miserable to my own eyes.

“I duped myself into believing that it could be real. That it was real. That we were a real husband and wife and there was real love between us. All right?”

I shook my head and lifted my gaze to meet her sympathetic expression.

“I was wrong, though. It wasn’t real, and it never could be. No matter how much I wanted it to be.”

I fought back the tears stinging the corners of my eyes.

“I should have listened to my gut, Jennifer. I should have listened to my gut. I was so stupid to believe it was anything other than what it was. A sham.”

Jennifer squeezed my arm.

“Are you sure all of it was a sham? I mean, obviously I’m on the outside looking in here, but it seemed to me that he really liked you. A lot. And I’m going to go out on a limb and say that you really like him. A lot.”

I appreciated what she was trying to do. I almost told her all the gory details about how he was looking to replace me with a supermodel or something. Instead, I gave voice to something that had been bouncing around in my head ever since I decided to leave the manor.

“Powerful men like Evan, there’s something about them that you just have to accept.”

“What’s that?”

“They’re used to getting what they want, and they see people as mere tools.” My face scrunched up into a scowl. “They might change their tactics, their strategies, but they’ll never change their nature.”

“That’s a very cynical worldview.”

“You said it yourself about Marshall. You didn’t change him. You just helped the nurturing, kind man on the inside come out to play in the sun. I’m not so sure there’s a kind man hiding inside of Evan Jones, Jennifer. I’m not so sure of that at all.”

“Are you sure you understand his character so thoroughly? I mean, there’s a degree of separation in the mere transactional aspect of your relationship with him. Maybe he’s hiding his real self, his real feelings, just very deep?”

I felt a flash of anger. Not at Jennifer, who was doing her best to help me talk it through. With Evan, for disappointing me.

“He used me, Jennifer. He used me, and now that he’s had what he wanted, he’s ready to discard me and replace me with someone new.”

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. He has candidates lined up and everything.”

Jennifer got up out of her chair and hugged me tight.

“You know that whatever happens, I’ve always got your back, honey.”

“I know.”

I hugged her back.

“I don’t know how to handle all of this,” I said with a sigh. “But for now, I just want to get back to work and try to forget about it for a little while, you know?”

The door popped open. Jake and Ramone swept into the meeting room, looking a little bit harried.

“I’m sorry we’re late,” Ramone said. “We were putting some finishing touches to the presentation.”

“Yeah, because somebody kept changing their mind at the last minute,” Jake said with a scowl directed at Ramone. His gaze darted back to me and Jennifer, and he figured out something was wrong.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Ramone gave me a long look and probably realized that it was neither the time nor the place for this.

“Nothing,” Ramone said. “Just give Amanda some space.”

“Are you sure?”

Ramone smacked him on the back of the head.

“Just get the PowerPoint ready, dummy. I said to give the lady some space. So, give

her space.”

Jake grumbled, but he prepared the presentation. Ramone stepped up in front of the screen with a laser pointer. The first image was of Jake scratching his head.

“What’s the biggest conundrum facing us as charity workers?” Ramone asked.

“Um, not enough hours in the day?” Jennifer said.

“Long flights?” I added.

Ramone grimaced at us.

“No, it’s really simple. The fact is most people around the world think of charity as something they only do at certain times of the year. Like on a holiday, or what have you. What if we could make it seem like charity was something that wasn’t for a special occasion, but an everyday occurrence?”

I looked between him and Jake, flabbergasted.

“You guys came up with this idea yourselves?”

Their heads bobbed.

“What’s wrong with it?” Jake asked.

“Nothing’s wrong, it’s just really ambitious, that’s all.”

“I told you she would act like this,” Jake said. “She doesn’t think we can pull it off.”

“That’s the point of the presentation, dude. We’re trying to convince her. Speaking of the presentation, will you look at your itinerary? We’re supposed to be on the fifth slide already.”

They got their act together, and the longer I listened, the more intrigued I became. They’d already recruited an astonishing number of celebrities, both from traditional media and internet influencers. Not only that, but they’d also gotten the celebs to agree to something I never thought was possible.

The celebrities and influencers were going to make posting about the charity work a regular occurrence, presenting it as a part of their everyday life, to try and normalize it for everyone who followed them. It was all about using their influence for the greater good, which a surprising number of them were willing to do absolutely for free.

Jake and Ramone wrapped up their presentation, speaking the last line together.



“So, this will bring saving the world to the next level!”

I stood up and applauded. Jennifer smiled and gave them a thumbs up.

“Bravo, gentlemen. Well done indeed...”

My voice trailed off. I looked at the PowerPoint slide, then at presentation notes splayed out in front of Ramone.

“Um, what did you just say? About taking it to the next level?”

“That’s our slogan!” Ramone said, his eyes burning with pride. “The project is called Next Level.”

“Project Next Level,” I repeated, sitting back in my seat. I’d fucked up big time.

“Yeah, take a look.”

And then they handed me the same damn folder I’d seen on my fake husband’s desk. He wasn’t looking for a replacement for me. He was looking for people to join the charity bandwagon and take it literally to the next level.

“I made a huge mistake.”

They all looked at me funny, but I shook it off. A happy energy seized hold of me.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, hugging both Jake and Ramone. “You guys did great. Knocked it out of the park.”

“Um, okay,” Jake said, looking confused.

“Now, I have to go and call Evan. I have to explain... everything.”

I turned my phone back on as I left the boardroom. As soon as I did a ton of messages popped up, most of them from Evan. They popped up too rapidly for me to make out what they said, except for the last one, which was the most recent text of all. I noticed that there was a paperclip symbol and tapped on the attachment icon.

My eyes widened when I saw the label on the attachment.

Divorce Papers.PDF

## Chapter 20

Amanda

As we rolled down the street, I stared out the window. The cabbie had a penchant for soul-tinged jazz. It emanated from his radio speakers, though I could see he played the music off of his phone.

I replayed all of the ‘greatest hits’ of my phony relationship with Evan. The moment I laid eyes on him, I just knew he was going to be trouble. The thing was, I really craved a little trouble in my life at that point.

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The way he'd moved around the room, magnetically attracting everyone around him like magic, had made me feel even more inadequate. How could a little tiny match possibly stand up in the face of a living supernova?

Then I'd slept with him on our second meeting. That hadn't been something I'd expected at all. The plane ride had been magical, but again I had thought it to be just a one-time thing, though a part of me yearned for it to be so much more.

After that, he'd sprung the whole fake marriage idea on me. I had avoided him at first, it was true, but then I'd gotten to know the man behind the cult of personality. I learned that Evan Jones wasn't so easily distilled into a stereotype as he wanted the world to think.

Or so I had thought. When I'd confronted him about the faux nature of our marriage and the very real jealousy he'd displayed, Evan's response had not been empathy. Instead, he'd decided to divorce his fake wife for real.

I wasn't sure what I had been expecting. Evan Jones, throwing himself at my feet and professing his everlasting love? Telling me what I wanted to hear, that it wasn't all a sham. It wasn't all a hoax. We both actually cared for each other?

Not Evan Jones. Not the Billionaire Bad Boy, 'right now, by God' dictator of all that he surveyed. He didn't know what love was. I thought maybe I would be the one to help him learn. Instead, I'd just gone and played the fool.

I rolled along in the back of the taxi, looking at the ghostly reflections of the signal lights reflected on a glossy sheen of water. Even the reds and greens seemed muted

on that rainy day in the city. It was as if they dimmed their lights in respect to my ongoing misery.

The rain hitting the car window cast a gray blurry smudge over everything I viewed through it. An intangible pall hung over the entire city, it seemed. The iron sky put a grayish hue on everything and everyone.

It was as if my ill mood was infectious. Everyone seemed a little subdued, a little less lively. The city folk moved as if they were under a heavy weight bearing down on them.

I couldn't believe that it was all about to be over. For real and for fake. The fake wedding was going to be a thing of the past once I signed those papers. Anything real between myself and Evan, imagined or not, potential or not, would be over, too.

I shouldn't have been nervous or upset. I mean, a fake marriage ending should be about the same as ripping off a band-aid, right?

Just get it over with quickly and everything would be fine. Only, I knew that wasn't going to be the case. I had gone and done something stupid. I had let myself get emotionally involved with a fake husband in a sham wedding.

Ironic that a fake wedding would cause so much real misery. I couldn't figure out the exact point where it had all gotten too real. Even though I knew the start point, and the ending point, I couldn't quite figure out where it went wrong in between those two fixed points.

I was never one of those little girls with stars in her eyes dreaming of marrying prince charming or anything like that. But after our soulless marriage, lavish but soulless, I wasn't sure what was so different about me and those little girls.

I didn't want a massive, lavish wedding. That just wasn't important to me. Sure, it had been nice, and a spectacle. Who doesn't like fireworks? Who wouldn't want a lot of celebrities at their wedding? Who wouldn't want a world-famous pop star to perform a live show just for your special moment?

Those sorts of things are great, but our wedding night had been nothing but heartache for me. Like life was dangling what I really wanted right in front of my nose and then giving me everything but what I really wanted.

Sorry, Amanda. No true love for you. Your wedding is a sham, but look! At least you have acrobats and fireworks. At least everyone else on the planet thinks it's all real. Everyone else, but the two people in the wedding and a handful of close associates. It's a fairytale wedding without the parts you actually want, but everything else but the kitchen sink is included. Pretty sweet deal, right?

All the people down on the street scurried for cover as the rain intensified. It went from a hissing susurrus to a steady tattoo of heavy impacts. The rain fell so hard it created a micro stream. The raindrops hit the surface of the rushing water and splashed back up. The kind of 'Forrest Gump' rain where it hit you from both sides at once, making sure that you'd be thoroughly drenched even if you had an umbrella.

The taxi slowed almost to a halt. A traffic jam. Great, I thought. Just what I needed, as if my life wasn't going poorly enough as it was. I just wanted to get this endeavor over with so I could move on with my life.

Which, of course, meant that life was going to fuck with me. I was stuck in the slowest taxi in the most congested traffic jam in the history of ever. I had nothing to do but wallow in my own misery. I'd jumped to conclusions, and it had cost me.

Now I was on my way to sign divorce papers. Very real divorce papers for a very fake marriage that maybe blurred some lines and edges. I knew that my heart would

never be the same. Maybe I could have had it all, but given all of the other strife, my abandoning the manor and Evan had been the straw that broke the camel's back.

Oh, how ironic it all was. It brought a bitter smile to my lips. After all of my hemming and hawing, after all of my not trusting Evan and expecting that at any moment things were going to go sour, it was me who wound up tanking the relationship.

It was me all along. I remembered seeing some old black and white television show once in a motel room at like three in the morning. A magical mirror supposedly showed you the face of your assassin. In the end, the dictator using the mirror realized that he was his own assassin all along.

Now I was looking into the cab's rearview mirror and thinking much the same thing. I'd ruined things. Me. Not Evan. Evan had tried to make things better. Evan had stopped dictating every aspect of my life and started listening to me. He started acting more like that man who made love to me with so much sensual passion on the translucent jet flight.

I felt so far away from that blessed moment in the clouds, when it had felt as if we were flying over everything, above everything, two angels locked in eternal passion. Unfortunately, what goes up must come down. I'd come down pretty hard. I'd come down about as low as I could go without being ridiculous about it.

As I drew nearer to Evan's office building, my trepidation mounted. I suddenly wanted the ride to take longer. In fact, I never wanted the ride to end. Because as long as I was in that taxicab, stuck in a traffic jam, it wasn't over. I wasn't going to be able to meet Evan for the last time. I wasn't going to be able to sign the divorce papers and make the decision final.

But despite my fervent wishes, the traffic snarl cleared up. We passed by what looked

like someone changing a flat tire and the taxicab driver wouldn't stop grumbling about it. He pulled up outside of the building and dread clutched at my core.

I paid him a good tip for the trouble and got out of the cab. I stared up at the building, mostly dark at that hour of night. When I entered the building, I found it all but empty. It felt strange walking around the darkened corridors all alone.

I rode the elevator up to the top floor and stepped off. My heels clacked unnaturally loud on the tiles as I walked down to the office suite that was Evan's home away from home.

I opened the door and saw him sitting behind his desk. His expression was sharp and inscrutable, as always. Jenna stood flanking him to the left, and a man I did not recognize stood to his right.

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“Mrs. Jones,” the man said. “I’m Rhett Bartley, Mr. Jones’ counsel. I believe you will find everything to be in order here. It’s missing only your signature.”

He placed a packet of papers on Evan’s desk. I settled into the rolling chair on the opposite side of the desk, trying not to look at Evan. I could feel his eyes on me, intense but implacable. As impenetrable as stone.

I stared at the papers and sighed. I paged through them and initialed all the little boxes where I was supposed to initial. I signed and dated all the places I was supposed to do that, too. Every time I did so, it was like another knell of the funeral bell of our time together.

Inevitably, I got to the end of the packet and signed for the last time. I slid it back over to Rhett, who stared at it for a moment before going through it page by page.

The oppressive space bore down on me like a tomb. Rhett nodded as if satisfied that I’d crossed all the t’s and dotted all the i’s and then handed the packet to Evan.

“Mr. Jones, if you will please double-check the document and make sure you’ve signed and initialed where indicated?”

Evan’s gaze blazed into me as he took the packet. I had to look away. He signed a couple of places he’d evidently missed, then slid the document back to Rhett. Everyone was being so civil, but also so stiffly formal it was almost like a practical joke.

Jenna arched her brows and addressed me directly.



“Signing these documents frees you from all of your contractual obligations, save for one. Your NDA about the nature of your contract with Mr. Jones will remain off limits in discussions with the press. If asked, you will only say two words. No comment.”

I nodded, remembering that little caveat when I’d signed up for the deal.

“I suppose we’re done here?” I asked stiffly.

“Yes, we are,” Rhett said.

“Then I’m out of here.”

“Wait.” Evan stood up. “Can I get five more minutes of your time?”

I scowled at him.

“Please?”

I rolled my eyes and sighed.

“Five minutes and not one second longer than that.” I held my fingers apart a short span. “Not one little bit, you understand me?”

Evan turned to his employees. “Would the two of you please give me a few minutes in private with the former Mrs. Jones?”

I blinked in confusion. His politeness took me aback. I was not used to seeing Evan treat his employees like that.

On their way out the door, Jenna winked at me, exactly the way she had on my

wedding night.

I was too sad to care what she meant by her wink.

Evan waited for them to leave and then caught me with his gaze.

“What I want to know right now, more than anything else in the world, is why you left like that.”

I tried to formulate a response, but he was not done.

“But I’m not going to ask you that. Do you know why?”

I shook my head.

“Because you’ve taught me something very important.”

“And what’s that?” I asked, rather stiffly.

“If you want to truly have something, truly have it, then you need to let it go.”

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He gestured at the divorce papers sitting on the desk.

“I knew that so long as we had this contract, it would be a barrier between us. We could never be together as long as we were bound by a fake contract. I didn’t want our marriage to be fake anymore.”

My mind was reeling. I couldn’t believe my ears. What was he saying? It didn’t make any sense. He wanted to divorce me so he could be with me.

“I have just one thing to ask you,” he continued. “One simple thing. And I pledge to accept your answer, no matter what answer you decide to give.”

His eyes shone with intense light. My heart skipped a beat at the thought that I was the focus of the near totality of his being in that moment.

“What?” I asked, my throat suddenly dry. “What did you want to ask me?”

“Will you go out on a date with me?”

I flinched, my mouth falling open wide.

“No contracts. No fake weddings. No silly pretense or pretending to be anything other than what we are. Just you and me, being together the way we should have from the start. What do you say? Isn’t that the fresh start we both need?”

I sat back in the chair, feeling the gravity of the situation smack into me like a ton of bricks. He was asking me out. Evan Jones, the most eligible bachelor on the planet, as

of five minutes ago when I signed those papers, was asking me out.

He really was interested in me. Plain old me.

As I pondered this fact, I also considered how I was going to answer him. I came to a decision and looked up at him sharply. My mouth formed the word before it had fully taken shape in my mind.

“No.”

## Chapter 21

Amanda

“No?”

Evan looked genuinely surprised, and then genuinely devastated. He didn’t even try to hide behind the usual mask of Mr. Iceman.

“No. You heard me. I did not stutter.”

His eyes narrowed to slits as he gained his composure and tried to mask his hurt with anger.

“And I suppose you’re not going to tell me why you don’t want to go out with me?”

“It’s very simple, sir,” I said with a mocking grin. “You see, the purpose of a vis-à-vis date is to get to know someone to determine whether you want to spend the rest of your life with them. I don’t need to go on a date with you to know the answer to that question.”

His anger mellowed with confusion.

“Don’t you see, Evan? I already know that I want to be with you.”

His mouth fell open, and a look of wonder came over his handsome face.

“I had a lot of doubts for a long time, Evan. About you, about me. Mostly about me, though. I never thought that someone like you could love someone like me. But I have no doubts. I finally have no doubts, and I know what I want.”

My lips spread in a mischievous grin. “I want you, and I’m not afraid to admit it. So, I’m going to ask YOU out on a date.”

“I accept your proposal,” he blurted quickly. “I totally accept. Completely. Wholeheartedly.”

I smiled and felt a giddy warmth spread through my chest.

“So, what do you want to do? Where do you want to go? I’m fresh out of translucent planes, but maybe dinner and a movie?”

I checked my phone.

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“Make that a late dinner and a very late movie... it might be too late to pull this off.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, his eyes intense with desire. “I think that if we view our fake wedding as a sort of practice session, then we can move to more advanced dating activities.”

“Advanced dating activities?” I laughed softly as he came out from behind his desk. “Advanced dating activities... is that what they call it in the corporate world? Or is that what the kids are calling it on the internet?”

He put his hand on my cheek, velvety soft and warm. I basked in the glow of his touch, feeling pulses of delight stream through my nerves. My eyes slowly closed as my breaths came faster, heavier.

I could feel my blood pulsing in my veins as he pressed his lips against my own. He kissed me tender and sweet, slowly pleasuring me with a very giving performance.

He smothered me with passionate kisses, first taking my lips, then moving down to my neck. His mouth felt so good, so soft and enticing against my skin. I cried out and clutched my arms around his shoulders and neck. His soft hair felt amazing running through my fingers.

Evan’s hands moved up to my blouse, unbuttoning the top notch. I felt the fabric peel away from my skin. Leaning back, I grasped his head and watched as he slowly stripped away my outer layers to reveal the real me.

I slipped out of the blouse as he slid it off my shoulders. He carefully laid it across

the back of a chair and then turned back to gaze at me lovingly. Evan's smoldering gaze traveled down to my bra-clad chest. Once again, I regretted not wearing sexy underwear. But who wears sexy underwear to sign divorce papers except some kind of psychopath?

I loved watching him enjoy the sight of my body. Then he cupped his hands under my breasts and lifted. I sighed as he worked at the snap between my breasts, then moaned in relieved delight as it came free. He gently removed the bra and placed it on top of my blouse.

Our eyes met, and suddenly he was kissing me again. He lingered in his passions, hand clutching at my now bare breasts. Evan traced a soft line across my nipple. It hardened almost immediately. I loved the feeling of his warm skin against my own.

Evan crushed my lips with a passionate kiss, his hand sliding down to the small of my back. I lost myself in the kiss, my mind drifting on a plane of desire and heat. Evan slipped his fingers into the hemline of my panties. I gasped as they interlaced in the groove of my ass.

"You're so beautiful, Amanda," he growled low in his throat. His eyes filled with the kind of animalistic desire that I expected to find in a pure alpha. But I was also pleased to see that his gaze also held a lot of deep affection. I felt warmed up from the inside out.

"Thanks," I gasped, because I felt like I should say something. He shoved his face between my breasts and made a satisfied groan. I grabbed the back of his head and caressed his hair as his lips sought out my nipple.

He suckled like a greedy infant, flicking the nub with his nimble tongue. A sharp cry forced its way out of my throat. It felt so amazingly good to have him enjoying my body like this. I never wanted it to stop.

Evan set me on his desktop. I leaned forward to facilitate his unzipping my skirt. I slid out of the garment and then sat on the desk clad only in my panties. His hand slid up the inside of my thigh, trailing sensual delights in its wake. Evan rubbed my panty-clad pussy gently, teasing me into an ever more attenuated state.

“It feels like someone is getting all nice and wet,” he purred, eyes glowing with lust.

“Why don’t you check and see?”

He cocked an eyebrow and then shoved his face against my crotch. My mouth flew open in a sharp gasp. I felt Evan’s teeth scrape along the edge of my thigh. A moment later, he caught hold of my waistband against his jaw.

Evan’s eyes rolled up to meet my gaze. Then he pulled back like a dog with a tasty treat and ripped my panties right off of my body. I didn’t know if it was the sudden exposure, or the animalistic grunt he made, or the way he’d just so thoroughly stripped me without using his hands. Possibly it was all three. All I knew was I had never been so turned on in all of my life.

“Amanda, I think you have the cutest pussy in all of the world.”

A moan escaped my lips as he reached out and petted my pussy with gentle, sure strokes. I grabbed the edge of the desk and held on for dear life as he teased me with his expert fingers.

He used his fingers to peel my outer labia open, revealing just how wet my pussy had really become. Evan bit his lower lip and eyed my body like a hungry dog might eye a steak.

“Your pussy smells so good, Amanda. I just have to have another taste.”



He shoved his face between my thighs. I gasped, my eyes fluttering closed as he dashed his tongue down the pink trench between my swollen pussy lips. Evan got really deep into his work, figuratively and literally. My moans grew more guttural as he enveloped my pussy lip with his mouth for a lick and suckle session.

I grabbed the back of his head like a daredevil grabbing the handlebars of his motorcycle. I tried not to pull his hair, but he was working his magic on me with tongue and lips. I couldn't possibly keep any semblance of self-control with Evan going to town on my pussy in his inimitable fashion.

"Oh God, your pussy tastes so sweet," he exclaimed into the soft petals of my body. Then he latched onto the lip on the opposite side. My eyes squeezed tightly shut. Waves of pleasure pulsed through my body, piling up on one another and crashing into my brain. I saw golden sparks sizzling behind my eyelids.

I knew where he was going as soon as he pinched my clitoral hood between thumb and forefinger. My heart started thudding in my chest even harder than before. Evan lifted his gaze from my pussy. His whole handsome face glistened with my juices.

"Amanda," he purred. "I bet you want me to lick and suck on your dirty little clit."

"Oh, yes, sir," I cried.

"Have you been a good girl? Do you really deserve this?"

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“I’ve been such a good girl,” I gasped. “I came here to sign the divorce papers and everything and didn’t complain. I so deserve it.”

“You so deserve it, what?”

“I so deserve it, sir!” I was about to explode. I was so fucking close to climax at that moment. If he ruined my orgasm, I would probably throw him out the window.

“I agree. You deserve all the pleasure I can give you, and then some.”

His tongue rolled up my clit with one big, heavy lick. My mouth flew open as I sucked in a ragged gasp of air. I let it out as a long, undulating sigh as he continued to ply his tongue on my clitoral hood.

Evan leaned forward a bit more and enveloped my clitoris in his mouth. He suckled, making delighted sounds with great gusto. I felt the pressure building up as I was pushed along toward the precipice of a truly thunderous orgasm.

Evan suckled my clitoris as he worked three fingers into my pussy. I was so wet, so eager to have him inside of me that they slipped right in. He hooked his fingers up in a way that pushed the back of my clit into his mouth.

“Oh God,” I cried, gritting my teeth and groaning as he worked me into a frenzy. “I’m going to come, I’m gonna co—”

I sucked in air like a drowning person breaking the surface of the sea. Once my lungs were full, I let it out as a piercing scream that made my own ears ring. I rode the

tumultuous blast of delight emanating from my pussy. Again and again contractions seized my entire body, the epicenter in my clitoris.

I screamed my voice hoarse until I flopped back onto the desk and writhed about like a worm on a hot sidewalk. My gyrations caused a pile of papers to flutter off the desk onto the floor, but I don't think either of us exactly gave a damn. I know I didn't. All I knew, all I could think about, was how good it felt to cum again and again from Evan's lustful ministrations.

Evan undid his fly, and I laughed helplessly as he dragged his big, throbbing cock free. I sat on the edge of the desk and reached for it, stroking my hand along the shaft.

"It looks like you're really into eating my pussy," I said. It was my turn to purr.

"I'm even more into stuffing you full of this hard cock."

Evan pushed the head of his member between the dripping wet folds of my body. My eyes squeezed shut as he stretched me with his cock. When it went in all the way I let out a long moan, my hands kneading his chest muscles like an amorous cat.

"Oh God, it feels so good to have you inside of me," I gasped.

"I love being inside of you. I love you."

He thrust, and my mouth flew open in a sharp cry. I wrapped my legs around his waist, crossing my ankles right above his buttocks. I held on for dear life, trying to get him as deep inside of me as possible. I was so super turned on by the orgasms and the pussy eating that my sensitivity was way down.

He went at me with hard, gliding strokes of his cock. His face became a mask of desire and concentration. I could tell he was trying not to come. He wanted to make

me come again first.

I made it hard for him. I pulled him into me, and my pussy got in on the act. Every contraction seemed to try and draw him deeper inside of me.

Evan threw back his head and cried out, his eyes squeezing shut as he came hard. He filled me up with his hot, sticky seed, and then his cock just throbbed like mad. I came hard, screaming so many times that I got light-headed from lack of breath. I wound down into a shivering puddle of delighted, satisfied cuddliness.

Evan held me in his arms and kissed me tenderly.

Then, he suddenly pulled away from me, and I opened my eyes. I fell into the limpid pools of his gaze, feeling the warmth and affection that enveloped my soul. Evan's eyes blazed like the sun as words erupted from his throat in a spontaneous volley.

"I love you, Amanda."

My breath caught in my throat. I felt a thousand butterflies taking flight in my stomach. It was something I'd never thought a woman like me would hear from a man like him. But I knew it to be true.

"I love you, too," I said in a voice barely above a whisper.

## Chapter 22

Evan

My knee bounced under my desk because I brimmed with nervous energy. I kept checking the time obsessively, even though I knew that I had an alarm set to give me plenty of warning before I had to leave.

I had my laptop, my desktop, three tablets and my cellphone all spread out on my desk. Every one of them had a different report I was trying to correlate. It was hard to concentrate on work with what was coming later that evening. If I'd been able to, I'd have just given up on work and left the office for a while. But there's no rest for the wicked, or so they say.

Jenna entered my office, her brows knit together with worry. I set down one of my tablets and cocked an eyebrow at her.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Schultz from Accounts Receivable.”

“What about him?” I asked with a frown.

Her jaw worked silently for a moment. I could tell that whatever she was about to say I was not going to like the sound of it. Or she thought I wasn’t going to like it.

“Jenna, please, just tell me what’s going on with Schultz. He’s not dead, is he?”

“No, he’s not dead. His kid has some kind of thing going on with his appendix. Schultz is taking him to the emergency room rightnow.”

“That’s rough,” I said with a frown. “I had my appendix out when I was a kid. It hurt like hell until they cut it out of me.”

“Well, he wants to know if you can wait until tomorrow morning or later tonight for the shareholder’s report.”

My eyes widened, and I fixed her with a stalwart gaze.

“You get on the phone, and you tell Schultz that... right now he needs to concentrate on taking care of his family. I’ll make do without the report or get someone else to do it if I really have to.”

“Yes, sir.”

I checked the time and then stood up.

“It’s time.”

She nodded and started closing down all of my devices for me as I headed for the door. I slipped my phone into my pocket and rode the executive elevator down to the garage.

I climbed into the back of my limo. I called my head butler Chavez to remind him that everyone was to be in attendance for a special meeting. All of the house staff gathered in one place at one time.

When I arrived at the manor, I was surprised that Jenna had beaten me there. Then again, she drove herself and didn’t have a gigantic limo to maneuver around, so I shouldn’t have been as surprised as all that.

Jenna fell into step beside me as I entered the manor house. I made a beeline for the north conference room. When I walked in, I was pleased to see that Chavez had gathered all of the household staff together for me, just as I requested.

They projected an air of stoic readiness, but I could see beads of sweat and anxiety dancing in their gazes. I walked up and down the line of them in silence for a few moments, gathering my thoughts.

“I’m sure you’re all wondering why you’ve been gathered together here. There is a serious issue we have to discuss.”

Some of the staff glanced nervously at each other. More than a few paled to the same shade as a vampire.

“And that issue is this... Melissa is having a grand baby, and she needs two things.

Congratulations, and gifts.”

The staff seemed shocked. At least, most of them did. I think a few of them had been informed by Melissa about the baby already.

The doors opened, and a crew of delivery men started bringing in presents. Melissa was flabbergasted by the generous pile that formed in front of her. Then her eyes went wide when I had a cake brought in, along with a huge tub of ice cream.

“Everyone make sure you get some of the ice cream. Oh, and Bill, I know you’re lactose intolerant, so I have some nice gluten-free pastries for you, since you can’t have the ice cream or the cake.”

I hung out at the impromptu party for a little while, but I kept checking the time. I had somewhere very special I had to be. Once I was sure that no one would be offended, I took my leave of the party and headed back outside. My driver hadn’t parked the limo in the garage. He’d listened to my special instructions to the letter.

“Hey, Jimmy,” I said. “Thanks for working late tonight. I know you’re trying to study for your big final.”

“No problem, Mr. Jones. I think it’s for a damn worthy cause.”

“Isn’t it, though?” I chuckled softly. “And you can call me Evan. Mr. Jones makes me feel like I’m at the office.”

“You’ve got it, Mr... that is, Evan.”

“How’s your mom doing? Did she ever get that bunion surgery?”



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“Yeah, she did. She went to that doctor you recommended and everything turned out great.”

“Actually, Jenna is the one who found that surgeon and got the information, so you should probably thank her. All I did was pass the information along. I’m glad your mom is doing good, though.”

“Yeah, she’s getting around a lot better now. I sure hope I don’t develop that problem later in life. It’s genetic, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“My uncle had hammertoes, and it kept him out of the war.”

I chuckled, because it was hardly the first time that he had told me that particular story. I wasn’t about to burst his bubble, though.

The driver took me back into the city. I stared at the bright glowing lights and thought how lovely they looked. Not half as lovely as the woman I was on my way to meet, however.

Jimmy pulled up in front of the Primrose Plaza. It was one of several such structures I owned just on that block, but there was something special about the Primrose. Mainly, it had a great restaurant on the top floor with the most spectacular views of the city.

I got a text on my phone. I picked it up and looked at the screen, seeing that Jenna

had sent me a message.

Everything has been arranged. Good luck!

I smiled and tucked my phone away.

“I’ll see you later, Jimmy.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Jones... I mean, Evan.”

I exited the limo and walked up the shallow steps to the building entrance. The doorman hastened to open it up for me, tipping his red velvet hat as I passed by.

“Hello Mr. Jones. Beautiful night, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is, Dick. Yes, it is. How’s the gout doing?”

“A lot better since I gave up drinking beer. Now I only drink whisky.”

“Well, whisky doesn’t have yeast so it shouldn’t aggravate your condition. Just take care of yourself. You’re the best doorman in this city.”

“Aw, shucks, boss. You’re only saying that because it’s true.”

We shared a laugh, and I went inside the building.

As I rode the elevator to the restaurant I thought about all the new things Amanda brought into my life. Take this doorman for example—six months ago, I didn’t even know his name. We certainly never spoke other than at the most basic of levels as he opened the door for me or greeted me or whatever.

When I arrived, the host hastened to welcome me. I smiled at him and made sure to put him at ease.

“Is everything ready?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. Everything is ready.”

“Excellent. I have the utmost confidence in you and your team to make this the most memorable night of our lives. No pressure.”

He smiled cordially and then moved to the side. He had no need to show me to my table. I already knew the way.

Amanda sat at a table all by her lonesome. The breeze stirred her hair as she gazed wistfully out of the window at a beautiful panoramic view of the nighttime cityscape. I thought that she was surely the most desirable woman in the world.

I approached her, and she frowned up at me.

“Well, it’s about time someone else showed up. I was starting to wonder what the hell was going on.”

I smiled and stood beside her chair, resting my hand on the back.

“Oh? Is there no one else around yet?”

She gave me a look.

“Obviously not, duh. You’ve got eyes. Why don’t you use them?” She checked her phone and grimaced. “How come nobody is answering my texts? I thought this was supposed to be some kind of big, important meeting. So, where the hell is everyone? I would have thought Ramone would at least be here.”

She checked her phone again and grimaced again. I wondered how much longer I could make her twist and squirm before my guilt got the better of me.

“I mean, have you heard from anyone else? Did they all go to the wrong restaurant or what? I’m so confused.”

“I have, in fact, heard from everyone.”

She blinked in confusion.

“You have? Then why the hell didn’t you lead with that?” She heaved a long sigh. “I’ve been sitting here worried sick for over half an hour. I’ve been nibbling on melba toast so much that I think I’m going to turn into a piece of melba toast.”

She gave me a suspicious look as she ceased her rant.

“Hey, wait a second. You’re smiling. You never smile like that unless you’re up to something. What is this, some kind of prank? Am I being punked? Where’s the

camera?”

“You’re not being punked, I assure you.”

“Well, that’s good to know. If you talked to everyone, then tell me why they aren’t here yet.”

“They aren’t here yet because there was never really a meeting. I just needed a false pretense to get you up here.”

Amanda’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“So, this is some kind of practical joke. What’s going to happen? Are snakes going to pop out at me or something?”

“Amanda, I just wanted to tell you something. You’ve helped me to see things in a different light. A lot of things.”

Her eyes widened, and her mouth closed on a retort. I had her now.

“I’ve learned that acting humane is the only way to treat people. I’m no longer going to think of people as just pieces on a chessboard. You’ve shown me the error of my ways. That’s one of the reasons why I know that you’re the one.”

“I’m the one what?”

Her mouth gaped open as I went down to one knee and produced a velvet box.

“Amanda Tate, will you marry me?”

On cue, the skyscrapers in the city went dark. The windows lit up in a pattern that

flashed ‘please say yes’ over and over again.

She stared at the spectacle; eyes wide as dinner plates. Then she turned to me and threw her arms around my neck and started crying.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she gasped. “A thousand times, yes. I’ll be your wife. For real this time.”

I crushed her into my embrace, and I never wanted to let her go.

## Chapter 23

Amanda

So, that’s the story of how my fake marriage led to a very real love affair, which, in turn, led to a real marriage.

Although I supposed it was more complicated than all of that. It was more of a case of very real desire turned into physical carnality and surprising intimacy, turned into the fakest of sham marriages, turned into real love, turned into eternal matrimony. Or something like that.

I couldn’t wrap my head around it. Once Evan proposed to me, he and I went through a ton of discussions about what we wanted out of things this time around. Not just what we expected of each other, but what we wanted out of the ceremony, specifically.

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Evan, being Mr. Billionaire, of course, wanted to go over the top. I have to admit that some of his ideas were kind of tempting. I mean, who doesn't want to get married on the top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris?

He'd offered to do many other things, and they just grew more outlandish as he went. Don't get me wrong. I adored his enthusiasm, I wanted to relish the way he took so much time and care to make sure I had the wedding of my dreams.

I let him prattle on about it a bit longer than I had to, just because I enjoyed it so much. I think he was suggesting we take a ride into space and get married in zero gravity when I told him what I really wanted.

He listened to me intently, his big, warm hands cupped over my own. I saw his brows arch high on his forehead as I went on, telling him exactly what would make me happiest.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I am in a position to literally offer you any type of wedding ceremony you choose."

"I know, sweetie, but the fact of the matter is if you really want to prove you want to give me what I ask for, then let's just go with my idea, okay? I know it's not as grandiose as you're used to—"

He mashed his lips on top of my own and kissed me hard and deep. I knew then that I was going to get exactly the kind of wedding ceremony I wanted. Not just the kind that I wanted, but the kind that I knew we both needed.

My first wedding featured hundreds of guests and cost millions of dollars. Our second wedding was somewhat different, to say the least. The fake wedding was a much larger affair than the real one.

Instead of riding in a stretched limo, we rode in an SUV, with Evan driving it himself. Autumn's golden-brown gown draped the rolling countryside hills as we drove along a winding road. The boughs of the trees arched overhead, limbs tingling like the hands of lovers. The sun in the sky had that moderated light it gets in the fall, the sky a perfect azure hue. I loved the smell of the crisp autumn air. It made me want to get cuddly and fostered a feeling of intimacy.

I glanced over at my husband-to-be... again. He noticed my attention and turned a smile my way. I brushed my fingers through my hair and smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle out of my sheath wedding dress. Unlike the ludicrously baubled-out gown I wore for our fake wedding, this one had a simpler design. It was still beautiful, though. The best way I could describe the dress was that I felt more like 'me' wearing it than the other one.

I supposed that after so much fakery and deceit and putting on airs for the press, I was ready for something real. The dress had a sleeker look to it, which was pretty much in style at the time, anyway.

I knew, we both knew, in fact, that there was a taboo about the groom seeing the bride until the moment she walked out in her wedding dress. We did that once before, and it was performative in the extreme. Now it didn't seem to matter.

Evan and I no longer stood on pretense. Everything was real now. And real was good. Real was the best. I wanted things to be real between us for the rest of our lives. It was so much better, not having to pretend.

But what was even better was I didn't have to worry. I knew how Evan felt about me.



I didn't have to doubt that his love and affection were a performance for the cameras. He showed me affection because he wanted to. Because he loved me.

The SUV came around a bend in the forest-shrouded road. My eyes lit up when I saw the chapel sitting on the hill. The chapel featured a round stained-glass window that caught the sun in the most brilliant way. Its colors splashed onto the nearby stream, making it appear as a ribbon of rainbow rather than water.

"Oh, honey," I said with a wistful sigh. "It's so beautiful!"

"I knew you'd love it."

I turned to him and kissed his cheek as we rolled up to a stop in front of the chapel.

"You always know what I like."

"That's because I pay attention," he said.

"Now," I said. I smiled to show I wasn't bitter about it.

I kissed him deeply. He pulled me into his embrace, and God help me, but I wanted to just hike up my dress and sit on his cock right then and there. I felt like that a lot around him now. Our passion only got even hotter since we stopped with the pretenses.

We broke apart when the chapel door opened and the wedding planner appeared. She, the minister, and a string quartet were the only ones present beside us.

After the insane number of people at our fake wedding, most of whom I'd never even met before, I wanted something more intimate for our real wedding. Something romantic that I could look back on for the rest of my life and think, 'Yes, that was

perfect. That was real.’

“I’m just glad you learned that you’re an incredible woman who deserves love.”

I looked over at Evan sharply. “You’ve really changed.”

“Not so much. I was just thinking that since I’ve adopted more humane practices at work, productivity has soared through the roof.” He shook his head and sighed. “I used to think that pushing people, which made them constantly afraid they might be replaced or left behind, got the best out of them. I know so much better now.”

He looked me dead in the eyes, and I melted a little at how his handsome face seemed to glow with affection.

“I have you to thank for that. And I can never repay you that debt.”

We kissed again, and the wedding planner laughed.

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“You’re not supposed to be doing that yet,” she challenged.

“On the contrary, we’re supposed to be doing this all the time,” I said.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Evan replied.

The wedding planner gave me my bouquet. It was nothing short of breathtaking. It had been constructed of wildflowers for a more natural look, but that only made it even more unique and beautiful than a store-bought one of genetically modified, arranged flowers would have been.

I inhaled deeply and sighed. The wind seemed to sigh too, as it went through the limbs of the trees. The golden-brown leaves still clinging to the skeletal limbs rustled in a pleasant susurrus.

We stepped inside the chapel. I loved the rustic look of it. It had the feel of a place where good things happened rather than a trap spewing fire and brimstone. I kissed Evan again and then we parted briefly. He took up his position at the altar as the wedding planner helped me don my veil and a few finishing touches on my appearance.

The string quartet started playing March of the Bride, and I wore a smile of uncontained happiness as I strode up toward the altar. Evan’s handsome face split in the goofiest, purest smile I’d ever seen him make. His icy façade cracked and revealed the real person underneath, and that person I loved more than anyone else on the face of the earth.

I took his hands at the altar. The minister said a few words, his face warm and smiling.

“One of my happiest duties is to see two people who truly love each other joined in matrimony. I can tell just by looking at the two of you that you have what it takes to make it. And before you ask, no, I do not say that to every couple.”

We both laughed gently, and then I read my vows.

“Evan, I love you because of the man you are. Not because of your money, or your success in business. I think that you probably already know this, but I wanted to restate it. I want you to understand that the person you are now is the real you. Not the icy bastard you thought you had to be.”

He smiled and squeezed my hand.

“I vow to love you, forever and always.”

Evan’s eyes glowed with affection. As he spoke his own vows, his voice dropped into a reverent tone barely above a whisper.

“Amanda, when I first saw you, I think I knew then that you were the one. I just tried to talk myself out of it. That was dumb.”

I laughed, and so did the minister.

“You’ve shown me that showing emotion and being kind aren’t weaknesses. They’re strengths. I’ve learned what love really is. It’s not just a feeling, it’s an action. It’s something you do every day. All day. All the time. And I vow to love you all the time, through the good times and the bad.”

The minister actually got choked up. He had to clear his throat a couple of times before he could ask if Evan had the ring. As for me, I was openly weeping, though not sobbing. It was tears of happiness, not pain.

He slid the ring on my finger, and then we kissed more deeply, more passionately, and for a lot longer than we ever had before.

The minister declared it a new record.

My first thought as we left the chapel as husband and wife was simple. No way was this going to end like our last wedding night.

This time, nobody was getting any sleep.

## Epilogue

Amanda

1 hour later

Going with the theme of simpler was better, we spent our wedding night not in the big city. Not in a posh hotel suite in the penthouse. Not even in a villa on the coast somewhere.

My new husband had purchased a luxury cottage on a private plot of land not far from the wedding chapel. We weren't totally alone in the cottage, as there was a security guard stationed at the gate out front, and another who roamed the walled-in grounds.

But they weren't to come inside the cottage unless it was an emergency. They had their own guest house a country mile from our cottage. This made it as close to a

secluded getaway as a world-famous billionaire and his new wife could get.

He carried me up the steps to the wraparound porch. I gasped at how lovely everything was. It was like a good witch's cottage from a storybook come to life. Everything had a painted, pastel veneer that somehow complimented the autumn landscape, rather than clashing with it.

"It's beautiful," I said with a sigh.

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“It’s also locked,” he said, trying to open the door awkwardly while also holding me aloft.

“Um, it’s a smart cottage. You insisted on that.”

I gestured toward the screen set into the wall beside the door.

“Oh, right. Door, open.”

The door lock popped, and then the door swung open mechanically. I guess it wasn’t as quaint as it looked after all.

Inside, I was treated to a cozy den with a fire already built in the huge natural stone hearth. A faux bearskin rug lay in front of it, looking so inviting I couldn’t stand it.

“Would you like to see the pool out back? Or maybe the fully stocked kitchen—”

In response, I kissed him hard. He kissed me back, carrying me over to the bearskin rug. He knelt down, never breaking our lip lock, and laid me on the rug.

I smiled up at him as he unbuttoned his shirt. The V at his neck split wider, revealing his chiseled, tanned physique. I reached up and caressed his exposed skin with my gloved hand. Evan doffed his shirt, and as he slid it off his shoulders I went to work on his belt buckle.

I undid his trousers, and then he stood up so I could pull them off. His cock sprang into view, already hard and pointed up at me.

I caressed his cock with my gloved hand, knowing the satiny feel would be amazing. He made a sexy groan and caressed the back of my head. I knew what he wanted so I gave it to him. He totally deserved it. Evan loved me so much and I wanted to return the favor. I wanted him to feel as loved as I did.

I took the tip of his cock inside of my mouth, carefully holding his gaze as I did so. I could feel his pulse throbbing in my mouth as I slid my tongue along the underside of his crown. He moaned, his eyes squeezing shut as I suckled gently.

He was so turned on, it didn't take much. I barely stroked his rod three times before he came in my mouth. A little bit dribbled down my chin, and he heroically wiped it off with his handkerchief.

"You are so beautiful."

"I bet you say that to all the women you've married who are on their knees with your cock in their mouth."

He laughed and caressed my cheek lovingly.

"You don't have it in your mouth at the moment."

"That can be remedied."

I took his cock back into my mouth. His eyes rolled back in his head and he let out a deep groan as I slid my tongue all along the underside of his crown.

"I love that so much," he gasped. "I love you so much."

I melted at his words, but his cock only grew harder and harder. I reached up with my free hand and cradled his balls. Evan's eyes squeezed shut as he tilted his head back.



His hand went to the back of my head, fingers interweaving with my hair.

“You’re so good at that, my sweet,” he cried.

Only because he deserved it. I wanted to make him feel good, because he made me feel good. Every hour of every day.

I never would have thought that the ice-cold Evan Jones I’d met all that time ago would turn into this sensual, passionate, and loving being. I supposed it was as my friend Jennifer said. It wasn’t that Evan changed into this man. It was more that he was always this man on the inside. I just helped coax the real Evan Jones to the surface.

I came off his crown, gasping for air. I kept my hands busy, stroking his shaft with one and fondling his sack with the other. His eyes met my own, and I loved the way he looked at me. Like I was his dream come true.

I ran my tongue along the side of his shaft, teasing him a little before I plunged the crown back into my mouth. I let go of his shaft and slowly took as much of his length as I could. I kept eye contact up until the very end, when he went in fully deep and I gagged a little.

I came off of him and grinned, again catching my breath.

“Don’t worry, I’m not done with you yet.”

I went after his missile, but he leaned me back onto the rug instead.

“I’d rather put it someplace else.”

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He slid his hand up my thigh, causing ripples of fiery pleasure to pulse through my body. I cried out as he stroked my soaking wet panties, finding the grove of my pussy.

I pulled out of the straps of my dress and then shimmied out while trying not to interfere with the amazing things he was doing down below. He knew how to stroke and tease my clit in just the right way. Not too much at first, just some light caresses in the vicinity, building up to more direct stimulation.

By the time he pulled my panties down around my ankles, I was so ready to go. I laid back on the rug, the soft fur feeling good on my naked skin. My blood thundered through my veins, fiery as the crackling hearth nearby. Evan looked down at me with a look of perfect, pure desire.

“There’s no other woman in the world for me,” he growled low in his throat. “There never could be, now. You are the love of my life.”

“You’re so sweet,” I said, feeling a glow in my chest unlike no other. “Most guys don’t say things like that after they get a blow job.”

His response was to push my thighs apart and kneel between them. I cried out as he slid the head of his cock through the groove of my pussy, getting it wet with my ample juices.

“I’m going to stuff my hot new wife full of hard cock,” he growled.

I wasn’t about to complain. He slid himself inside of me. I moaned as he slowly

stretched me, filling me with his throbbing member. I loved the way he felt inside of me. Our eyes met as he slid in all the way. I gasped, my hands going to his chest and kneading his powerful muscles.

Speaking of muscles, he pistoned his hips like a champion. My mouth flew open as I sucked in a ragged gasp of air. I let it out as a long, undulating moan. Evan leaned in closer, clasping me in his embrace. He pumped his hips in short but sensual and strong thrusts while he kissed my neck and shoulder.

I convulsed hard, my pussy caressing his cock as if it wanted to keep it as a pet. He felt so good inside of me. My scream of climax split the air. I closed my eyes against the fireworks exploding behind them as a ribbon of pure pleasure unwound itself through my whole being.

He continued to thrust away, rearing up onto his knees. He pulled me into him tighter and put my legs up on his shoulders. Then he leaned forward, his body weight adding impetus to every thrust.

I opened my mouth to let out a deep, guttural groan. I'd already cum so many times already, my body was finely tuned to find the utmost pleasure. Everything felt amazing, his hands on my hips, his body heat, the feel of the soft rug beneath me, and the warmth coming from the fire in the hearth.

"I love you so fucking much," he growled in a guttural tone. His body was taut as a bowstring against me, straining as he gave himself fully over to his desires.

There's a look a man gets when he surrenders to his desire, when he stops pretending that he's not trying to get off just as much as you are. Evan's face took on that aspect, a primal grimace of ecstasy and being fully in the moment with me that was impossible to fake. It was the realest thing I'd ever seen, felt, and experienced on a spiritual level.

We came at the same time, his cock throbbing inside of me as he filled me with his seed. I thrashed about as much as the pile driver position would allow, my arms going over my head as pulse after pulse of shuddering pleasure thundered through my body.

At last I lay there, panting heavily. He let go of my legs and gently laid me on my side. Evan lay beside me, curling his body up to spoon my own.

He wrapped his arms around me, cupping my breasts in a crisscross pattern. I laid my head on his biceps and panted, my body slowly coming back from the perfect golden cloud of pleasure I'd been taken up into.

I snuggled up against him, sighing contentedly. Evan's breath was warm on the back of my neck as he left a gentle kiss there.

"I love you so much, my darling." His voice was as soft as the fur beneath us. "I love you so very much. Thank you for being my wife."

"Thank you for letting me be, for real this time." I kissed his hand and then wriggled my bottom against him. I kept wriggling, a smile spreading on my face. I felt his cock twitch, hard. Then it began to engorge in blood.

"You're insatiable."

"That is so not true," I said. "You haven't even tried hard enough to be saying that yet."

"And how hard do I have to try?" he mumbled into my skin. He trailed kisses along my neck, his hands massaging my breasts freely.

"I don't know," I gasped. "I would think that going to dawn might be a bit extreme, as the sun hasn't even set yet, but you know... oh God, that feels so good... twelve

hours, maybe.”

“Twelve hours?” he cried.

“You’re not man enough to go for that long?” I taunted.

“I guess I can slum it and go down to that level,” he said with a shrug.

I gasped, but then he kissed my neck and slid a hand down between my thighs, and I lost all interest in trying to taunt him any further. He slipped his cock into my pussy, sliding it in deep.

He rolled me over onto my stomach and then pumped his hips into my ass. I let out a guttural groan as he thrust into me again and again, picking up speed. Golden electricity built up in my body to a crescendo until I was certain that I was going to explode.

I let out a warbling sound, modified by the syncopated rhythm of his thrusting pelvis. My eyes rolled back into my head and I let out a shrill cry as he pounded me right over the edge of another incredible orgasm. The contractions seemed to vibrate me into another state of being, it was so good.

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I don't know how many hours we actually went, but I'm pretty sure twelve was a conservative estimate. Let's just say we made up for our disappointing fake wedding night and then some.

Amanda

3 years later

There was an old phrase I remember hearing as a child. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes—fill in the blank with the name of whatever kid we wanted to make fun of that day at recess—with a baby carriage.

Well, as it turns out, that's a pretty logical progression. Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that Evan and I went at it like rabbits. In any event, I don't think we were married for a month and a half when I got pregnant.

Knocked up, as it were. I hadn't been expecting it to happen so soon, but don't get me wrong. It was the happiest news I'd ever gotten in my life.

Evan started strutting around like a proud poppa while our child was barely more than a zygote in my belly. He wasted no time in telling everyone. He did the whole bit, passing out cigars and drinking bourbon and slapping other men on the back.

For me, I was a bit afraid. I wasn't sure I would be a good mother. I am told by lots of women, Jennifer included, that such things are normal for an expectant mother. Jennifer told me there would be something wrong if I wasn't at least thinking about how my life would change when the baby was born, if not necessarily freaking out

about it.

Me, I was freaking out about it all right. Jennifer said that there was no reason why I should be worried. I countered that I'd never been the most nurturing person in the world. She told me that I was trying to nurture the Earth itself. I found this to be rather pretentious and called her out on it.

Jennifer just smiled and said that I would figure out how to be a good parent all on my own. I had everything it took, she said.

Still, I tried to direct my nervous energy to productive areas. I did my research, and then some. Just about every book on babies and expectant mothers out there got added to my Amazon shopping list. I also did a ton of research on the web, though after about your one thousandth mommy blog, you realize they're all pretty much the same.

I decided that the best thing I could do for our family was to prepare the environment. To that end, I wanted to have a literature-rich environment, which the library in the manor certainly provided.

On the other hand, I was afraid of living way outside of the city. I was afraid that if something happened, we'd be too far away from the hospital to make everything okay. For the first several months of pregnancy, I kept this anxiety to myself.

Eventually I told Evan, and he made me wish I'd said something from the get-go. He put his arms around me and told me it would all be okay.

He also told me that whatever I needed to feel better, he would provide, with no questions asked. He kept to his word, too, no matter how outlandish my prenatal demands grew.

I was worried that the manor couldn't be childproofed, so we moved into a condo downtown when I got pregnant with Stan.

Yes, it was a big change, but the fact was we both had jobs to do. The centralized location of our condo—he went and bought the whole building, of course, and then sublet everything except the top three floors we lived in—made it easy for both of us to get to our respective offices.

The work was not done. We still had to save the rainforest. Some of the governments in South America had become less receptive to conservation efforts, and we had to fight harder than ever to keep the world's lungs breathing.

I knew we were going to win, though. With Evan's brand recognition adding impetus to the cause, things were looking better already.

On a gloriously sunny Saturday, I sat on the veranda enjoying the outdoors. The city moved on below us, but my eyes were only on my toddler son. Stan already looked a lot like his father, though his nose sort of resembled my own.

Like his father, Stan liked to take a lot of risks. We'd already added netting around the veranda railing just in case he somehow managed to scale the four feet. He got into everything. I liked to joke that his pudgy body hid the fact he was really a housecat in disguise.

Stan squealed and jumped around in circles. He'd discovered a bird's feather, probably from a pigeon. He picked it up and thrust it in the air as he jumped.

It took me a moment to realize what he was trying to do, and I just couldn't help but laugh. Evan came out of the house, carrying a tray with iced tea for us and chocolate milk for our toddler son.



“What’s he doing?” Evan asked.

“He’s trying to fly. He found a bird feather and now he’s trying to figure out how to fly himself.”

“I think I remember doing that when I was a kid,” Evan said, his lips twisted into a frown.

“I’ll just bet that you did.”

Stan raced across the veranda, using his makeshift ‘wings’ to try and achieve what the Wright Brothers had all those years ago in Kittyhawk. That name always seemed kind of suspect to me. I mean, the place where planes first took flight just happened to have the word Hawk in it? It was like Alicia Keys being a pianist, or Harry Shearer being a barber. It just seemed too convenient.

Stan decided that the best way to achieve flight was to get some altitude from the get-go. I cringed as he raced up the steps to the top of the playground structure.

“Oh no.” I moved forward a half step. “Tell me he isn’t going to jump off the side.”

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“He probably is, but don’t worry. Those shredded tires are a pretty good surface to land on.”

“What if he breaks his neck?”

Too late for me to do anything about it, Stan jumped off the structure. He flapped his arms on the way down, then landed in a crouch on the shredded tires. He sprang right back up to his feet, flapping his arms anew.

“See? He’s fine.”

“I swear that he gets this insane risk-taking from you. You or your side of the family. No way would someone on my side of the family be this rash.”

“You say rash, I say brave.”

“You say potato, I say potat-toe,” I said with a snicker. “I’m not worried, if you want to know the truth. I somehow know it’s all going to work out for us.”

“Yeah,” Evan said, putting an arm around my shoulders. “Me, too.”

I leaned into his warm embrace and sighed in contentment. We watched our son play, whooping and hollering fit to wake the dead. I had no idea how he got so much energy. He made me tired just watching him play.

Then, my son noticed that Evan had arrived. He dropped the feathers and squealed with delight.

“Daddy!”

Stan ran over and threw himself into a hug round Evan’s legs. Evan almost dropped the tray, but I rescued it in the nick of time.

“Mommy!”

Stan hugged me next, throwing himself into my lap.

I hugged my son back, and then Evan knelt down and hugged us both. Life was perfect, and I couldn’t ask for anything more.

Amanda

6 months later

I closed my eyes so that the perky makeup girl could doll me up a little bit more. I already wore so many layers of cosmetics I felt like a clown. Yet I knew better than to complain. Her job was to make me look good in front of a camera, and there would be a lot of people watching.

I found the whole experience amusing, if you want to know the truth, because when I was pretending to be Evan’s fake wife I was regularly doused with large amounts of makeup. Not to mention things like clothespins holding my garments tightly across my midsection to as not to show so much as a single wrinkle.

I supposed that after living a couple of years relatively free of the media spotlight I was a bit apprehensive about going back under it. I knew it was for a worthy cause, though. I mean, causes don’t come much worthier than saving the freaking planet.

So, I sat there and endured while she patted a bit more foundation here, a little lip

gloss there, and fussed with my eyelash extensions until I wanted to scream.

“You have such great skin,” the perky girl said, a smile etched on her impish little face. “I hardly have to do any work at all.”

I couldn’t stop a chuckle before it bubbled out of my throat.

“If you call this hardly any work at all, I’d hate to see what you do to people who you think don’t have great skin.”

She cackled to herself and relaxed as if we were old friends. I took a moment to survey the room. I sat in a dressing room old enough to be stained with cigarette smoke on the wallpaper, and new enough to have the landline phone jacks painted over. Except for the vanity and the makeup mirror, the room was rather dimly lit. Not far away, I heard Stan’s cackle, followed by Ramone shushing him to silence.

“It’s all right, honey,” the makeup girl said, giving Ramone the eye. “He’s not bothering me.”

“We don’t want to interrupt you making your Mommy prettier, do we Stan?” Ramone asked.

Stan looked up at Ramone and giggled with the high-pitched energy that only a toddler can muster.

In my mind, I was thinking ‘go ahead and interrupt her, my ass is falling asleep after sitting in this chair for so long.’ I didn’t say that out loud, though. I didn’t want to hurt the makeup girl’s feelings.

“Oh, I can’t make her any prettier than God already has,” the make-up girl said with a smile. “All I can do is make sure that the camera captures the essence of her beauty.”

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By covering it up with a pancake's worth of foundation, I thought to myself. Again, I didn't say it out loud, though. I had become too polite since becoming a mother.

Part of it was I didn't want to upset my hosts. Not even the makeup girl. I wanted tonight to go off absolutely without a hitch. A lot was riding on it.

"Well," Ramone said as he lifted Stan up and put my child on his lap. "I guess it's not every day that you appear on Gordon Godfrey Live."

Ramone pronounced the name of the show with a kind of religious awe. I was never a huge fan of late-night talk shows. Even when I was in high school and college. I always thought there were better things to do at ten thirty at night than watch a bunch of celebs hawk their latest project while a failed stand-up comedian attempts to say pithy things and make the live studio audience laugh.

Like sleep, for example. Or certain other activities which also involve a bed. Watching television seemed like a waste of time to me at that point of the day.

Yet, I knew that millions of people did just that. They watched Gordon Godfrey Live because it was a saccharine take on the world. It made everything easier to take, I supposed. For me, I preferred the unvarnished truth. Then again, look at all of the problems I had because I had a fake relationship and an equally fake marriage.

After all of that chicanery and fakery, I wanted things to be real as possible. Gordon Godfrey was pleasant and entertaining, but he was not exactly real. He was what he was. A huckster, a ringmaster for a three-ring circus that was the Hollywood hit-making machine.

I hoped to use his powers for good tonight. His audience would tune in to hear the juicy details of my fake marriage, real divorce, and subsequent real marriage to Evan. But I would make sure that when they turned off the television at the end of the show, they had a good, thorough understanding of how crucial it was to preserve the Amazon rainforest.

“Ow,” Ramone said as Stan pulled on his beard.

“Stanley, no,” I said from across the room. Stan snapped his gaze over to mine, a sheepish expression on his cherubic face.

“Sorry,” he said, and I think he meant it. Stan wasn’t a bad kid, but he was a kid. He sometimes got overly excited and did things without thinking about them. He would never inflict deliberate harm on his uncle Ramone, or his uncle Jack or Aunt Jennifer for that matter.

Evan and I were raising him right, as far as I was concerned. He would not grow up damaged to the point he had to wear calloused armor to protect himself from the world like his father did. I worked long and hard to help Evan shed his armor and be his real self, unafraid to laugh or sigh. Unafraid to feel.

“Hey, where is your better half, anyway?” Ramone asked.

“Oh, he’s still trying to work,” I said with a laugh. “I’m sure he’s driving the make-up people crazy with how he keeps putting a phone up against his face. I finally told him that if he was going to network, he needed to do it outside.”

“Don’t you worry, hon,” the makeup girl said cheerfully as she flounced my hair a little, then shot it with a cold blast of hair spray. “Everyone is going to be looking at your gorgeous self. Your husband could come out in a potato sack and a ten-dollar haircut and look fine.”

“Ten-dollar haircut. “Ramone sputtered. “What’s wrong with a ten-dollar haircut? I have a ten-dollar haircut.”

“I never would have been able to tell,” I said wryly as he primped his frizzy mane.

The irony of course being that Ramone made more than enough money to get his hair styled anywhere in the city. The truth was, he hated to spend money on himself. He’d lavish his family with gifts and vacations and the like, but he rarely took anything for himself or for his own desires.

The door to the dressing room popped open. My heart lit up as my husband walked through. He looked so dashing in his three-piece tailored Italian suit. Evan knew that part of his function tonight would be to glam up and show the world that caring about the environment didn’t mean you were a frumpy nerd. Even the ‘cool’ people were doing it, to misquote my fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Periwinkle. Sometimes I wondered about whatever happened to her. I couldn’t picture her going home and being a regular person when I was a kid. I assumed she just slept at school.

Evan was still on the phone, and to be polite he didn’t want to come in the dressing room until the conversation was over. However, since he stood halfway through the door with it hanging open and we could hear everything he said, I don’t know why he bothered.

“No, you listen to me, Dave,” Evan said, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “I’ve emailed you about fifteen alternatives to using Dynacamp energy solutions for your project.”

Evan listened for a moment, and then his face twisted into a grimace.

“Well, those other companies don’t cut down vast swaths of forested land around the world to fuel their paper factories. No, Dave, I didn’t ‘turn into’ a tree hugger. I’ve

always given a damn about the environment; I just didn't realize how much power I had to change things until I met my wife."

Evan's lips twitched a snarl as Dave said something back.

"Soft? You think I've gone soft, Dave? You think I've gone soft?"

Evan extracted his other smartphone from his blazer pocket and tapped on the screen with his free hand.

"I'll show you soft," he muttered under his breath. "There, it's done. Oh, what's done, you ask? You forgot that I get to say which companies get to bid for our contracts. Newsflash—Dynacamp is not going to be on the list."

Dave said something back. Something loud and obnoxious from the sound of it, though I still couldn't make out what he specifically said. I heard some cuss words, though.

"Well, you're the one who called me soft. You started it. I tried to be nice about it. I tried to let you make your own decisions, but you had to go and be a dick about it and insult me and my wife. That means I cut you off. And if you want to continue to draw in that nice six-figure salary and drive around in that leased Tesla, you're going to do what I say, when I say."

Dave said something back, sounding more subdued this time.



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“Yeah, you’re right. I AM an asshole. Only these days, I’m more of hemorrhoid. I irritate assholes. Assholes like you. I’m hanging up now, Dave. Let this be a lesson on being stubborn.”

Evan ended the call and thrust both his phones back into their respective pockets. He turned his gorgeous eyes my way, and they filled with the light of affection.

“Hey, darling. You look gorgeous, though I’m not sure about that shade of lip gloss.”

“I kind of thought it was too dark, too,” I said. “But Kathy here assures me that when it’s on camera, under the bright stage lights, it’s going to look like a totally different shade of red.”

“Don’t you worry none, hon,” Kathy the make-up girl said with a big smile. “I’m going to make sure your wife looks like the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Evan cocked an eyebrow.

“But she’s already the most beautiful woman in the world.”

I melted, and Ramone rolled his eyes. I don’t know why he was being so dramatic. I’d seen Ramone with his own wife, and he was just as sweet and bubbly with her. I guessed that most people didn’t expect that kind of behavior from my husband. Evan had been known as the iceman of wall street for a long time before we met.

Fortunately, he hadn’t really been the cold-blooded bastard the media made him out to be. To be fair, the media only portrayed him that way because Evan took so many

pains to act as such. He wanted to craft a public image of the ruthless business mogul so that it would make his brand more valuable.

Evan had been shrewd from the get-go. He realized that a man with his kind of wealth and influence would have a rather large public footprint. He decided to use that footprint to his advantage. In fact, when we met it was all about creating value for the companies he owned.

I wondered what tonight's admissions would do to his Q ratings. Probably nothing. Even so, he'd moved some of his assets around to make sure to protect our wealth in case things went badly.

I didn't think it was going to cause problems. The tabloids had already had their field day with our original divorce and then re-marrying. They already ran us through the mud, so to speak, a couple of years back.

Now, though, we were something of the sweethearts of the world. Our work with charity and the fact that we'd remarried in such a small intimate ceremony had done wonders for the urban legends surrounding our brand. And it was our brand now.

Evan didn't seem to mind. He knew as well as I did that our fame was only a means to an end. We didn't get off on being famous. We wanted to use our public footprint and world-renowned fame for good. We wanted to save the planet.

"Now, if I could just get you back in my chair for a wee bit of touch-up, Mr. Jones."

Kathy smiled, showing both rows of teeth, and pushed the chair out invitingly toward my husband. Evan looked as if he wanted to argue about it. I decided to shut him down right real quick.

"Honey, just sit down in the chair and let her have her way with you," I said

chidingly.

“Daddy gets lipstick,” Stan said, which made both him and Ramone almost fall all over themselves laughing.

“Oh, spicy,” Kathy said with a chuckle. “I didn’t know you two had an open marriage.”

“We don’t,” Evan said dryly. I caught his gaze with my own and gave a slight shake of my head. He sighed. “Of course, I’ll get back in the chair and let you finish, Kathy. Make me look like a trillion bucks.”

“You already look like a trillion bucks,” Kathy said, trying to steal his thunder but it didn’t go over so well.

“Now, dear, you know what you always say about letting a professional do their job. And about not interfering with a professional doing their job.” I gestured to Kathy. “She’s going to make you look so good that all of the women watching at home will...”

I glanced over at my son. I’d been about to say ‘cream their panties’ but I thought better of it.

“...want to go on a date with you,” I finished lamely. Sometimes being a parent really put a cramp in my acerbic comebacks and witty repartee.

“Well, they’re going to be disappointed. I’m a one-woman man these days.”

I loved it when he said things like that. It warmed my heart. I looked on adoringly as he got his makeup touched up by Kathy. I sat down in a different chair and Stan immediately came and started pulling on me.

“Leave mommy alone for a little bit, bud,” Ramone said, wrangling my child. “You don’t want to make her dress all wrinkly or smudge her lipstick before she goes out on stage, do you?”

“Uh uh,” Stan said, shaking his head.

Evan put up with the makeup process like a champ. He knew how high the stakes were. More than a dozen different companies were fighting for the rights to chop down vast swaths of the Amazon rainforest. It was our job to shine a light on all of that and also to try to stop it.

It wasn’t like Evan could buy every company in the world engaged in deforestation. I mean, he probably had the money, but not all of them wanted to sell. Some of them were involved in local politics and even organized crime.

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A sharp rap at the door drew all of our attention. Ramone almost jumped right up out of his seat.

The door opened slightly and the face of a man wearing headphones appeared.

“Five minutes until they call you out, Mr. and Mrs. Jones.”

“Thank you,” I said to the producer. I couldn’t remember his name, though I’d heard it spoken a dozen times. He looked like every Hollywood producer of a television show. Short, balding but with frizzy hair on either side of his head. The tweed jacket he wore looked cheap and probably was, belying the fact he probably made as much money or more than Gordon Godfrey himself.

I turned to Kathy as she administered to my husband.

“Did you hear that, Kathy? You’re going to have to hurry.”

“Oh, I’m almost done with him, hon. Doesn’t he look so handsome?”

“Yes, he does,” I agreed, though it had nothing to do with her makeup. I didn’t mind seeing him without makeup. In fact, I liked seeing him when he didn’t wear anything at all... which was how I’d gotten pregnant in the first place.

“I can’t believe either of you aren’t nervous.” Ramone shook his head, eyes filled with confusion. “If I were about to go out and be interviewed by THE Gordon Godfrey, I’d be pi.... that is, I might pee my pants.”

He looked anxiously at Stan, but my son didn't seem to have heard. Stan knelt in front of a mahogany coffee table with lots of coffee rings stained into the wooden surface. He busily used a fistful of crayons to create a bunch of dots on a piece of paper. The rapid tattoo of his stippling filled the air with his childish joy.

Stan thrust his tongue out of the corner of his mouth as he hammered the crayons down. I used to worry about him breaking them, but that was the old me's way of thinking. The old me who worked as a waitress and had to make everything last as long as possible.

My days of worrying about the price of crayons and their subsequent consumption were over. As were the days of my buying two-ply toilet paper and pulling it in half to make it last longer. Money wasn't a problem any longer for us. Awareness of what was going on in the Amazon rain forest, now that was a problem.

I was glad that Jennifer and Marshall had decided to go ahead and let us be the public faces of the charity work. Evan was made for the spotlight, and our crazy love story had captured public attention in a way that it would be foolish not to capitalize upon.

Otherwise, Gordon Godfrey would not have invited us onto his show.

The producer stuck his head back in and motioned for us.

"Kathy, I love you, you're the best, but that's enough. I need them now! They need to be on point for the big introduction."

I headed out into the hallway first. Evan had to don his blazer again, so he brought up the rear. We stood together while the producer barked orders into the microphone attached to his headset.

"We are less than thirty seconds to go time, people! We've got to make this work

right the first time, we're live for crying out loud! Doris, you better have the band ready to play the intro or I swear to God I'm billing my ulcer medicine directly to your Discover card. Why the Discover card? Because I know you never use it. Just get them on cue."

I shot a smile at my husband. He reached out and took my hand, giving it a squeeze. It felt so good to have my husband at my side.

The producer led us to a large, peeling white circle on the backstage area. The red velvet curtains were a mere five or six feet from our location. I could imagine all of the people in the audience waiting to gawk at us on the other side. I was so used to public appearances at that point, though, that it didn't give me any anxiety.

"Are you nervous, honey?" Evan asked.

"No, not really."

"You just seemed like you were really deep in thought."

"Oh, I was deep in thought."

I gave him a cheerful smile. He waited, but I didn't elaborate. I still liked to fuck with him from time to time.

"And what were you deep in thought about?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" I asked with a grin.

"I'm quite sure."

"I was honestly thinking about where we're going to eat after the show."

“Oh.” Evan laughed. “I thought we would try Viviano’s.”



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“Oooh, I don’t know if that’s a good idea. The only thing that Stan will eat on the menu is spaghetti.”

“Why is that a problem?” Evan asked, cocking his head to the side while we waited our time to go on stage.

“Because” I said wryly, shooting a pointed look at Ramone. “Uncle Ramone let him eat two cans of spaghetti-O’s before we came here tonight.”

Ramone had the good grace to look sheepish about it and shrugged.

“You were both busy ‘getting ready,’ he said with a knowing wink. “And you know how picky the little twerp is about his food. I’m lucky I got him to eat at all.”

The producer raced in front of us and held up his hands.

“You guys are on in five, four, three...”

He stopped talking but kept holding up his fingers until he reached zero. We heard the sound of Gordon Godfrey’s voice from beyond the curtain.

“My next guests need little introduction. If you’ve been near a mobile device, magazine, or newspaper in the last couple of years you probably already know who they are.”

Laughter rippled across the audience, and Godfrey waited for it to subside before speaking again. I glanced over at Evan and smiled. He smiled back, but you know

who wasn't smiling? The producer, the poor, nervous producer.

"No," he hissed in a voice below a whisper. "Here, like this."

He carefully took our arms and folded them into each other. I guessed at the time that it would probably look better on camera than the two of us holding hands. Holding hands is casual. Linking arms seemed more formal. Or so I figured. It seemed like a lot of quibbling to me, but I really wanted everything to go off smoothly.

Outside the curtain, Godfrey continued.

"They were once the darlings of the tabloids, always good for a shocking headline or photo op. Now, they're the darlings of the charity world. Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for Amanda and Evan Jones!"

The curtain parted. I had always thought the shimmering barrier was moved by some sort of mechanical device, but I saw a stagehand busily yanking on a cord, so I realized it was not. The curtains opened and the stage lights flooded my vision. I knew my cues, even though I was temporarily blinded, and so did Evan.

We walked along the preset path, just like we'd rehearsed, smiling huge for the host. Gordon Godfrey leaped to his feet when we came out. He moved out from behind his desk, displaying his usual frenetic energy, and shook hands enthusiastically with both of us.

"Welcome to the show," he said, though the mike didn't pick it up.

Gordon was not a very tall man, but his portliness and frizz of white hair made him seem bigger than he actually was. The cut of his suit indicated it had been tailored when he was a bit lighter than he was on that night. Gordon wasn't obese, but he did have a belly hanging slightly over his belt.

His hair was balding on top, but the sides were very long. It almost made him look like one of those old comic book characters from World War II. More like a caricature than a real person, but I knew that was a carefully cultivated look.

I couldn't object to his appearance. After all, my own looks were carefully cultivated. Every accessory, every bit of jewelry and extra flair was designed to send a message. I made sure that all of the things I wore were both cruelty-free and responsibly sourced. It would have made me a gigantic hypocrite if I'd gone out wearing a designer who had done damage to our goal of saving the rainforest.

We were seated on the sofa. I felt Evan's reassuring warmth next to me. The stage lights were so bright I really couldn't see the audience much, except for some of the people in the closest rows to the stage.

I settled in and Gordon did the same.

"Welcome to the show," he repeated, this time for the cameras.

"Thanks for having us," I said. Evan and I had already decided I should do most of the talking. He was so magnetic we feared he would draw more attention to himself than to the cause we were promoting.

"Oh yeah, an absolute pleasure," Godfrey said. "How's the parental life treating you? I understand you have a toddler?"

"I wish I had his energy," Evan said. "He just goes, goes, goes, nonstop."

"Yeah, my kids are the same way," Godfrey replied. Then, his smile faded ever so slightly. I knew we were about to 'go there.'

"All right," Godfrey said, rubbing his hands together. "I'm just going to address the

elephant in the room. Namely, you guys are married, right?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling even though I knew where he was going with it.

“Buuuut,” he said, dragging out the syllables for dramatic effect “it’s not the first time the two of you were married, now, is it?”

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Laughter bubbled up out of the audience. I smiled good-naturedly, as did Evan. Neither of us bore any rancor toward Gordon Godfrey for bringing it up. Like everything else that looked to be spontaneous on that stage, it had been carefully negotiated and rehearsed.

“No, it’s not the first time we were married.” I looked over at Evan. He put his arm around my shoulders and gently squeezed. “But I have no regrets.”

“So, what happened the first time?” Godfrey asked. “You seemed like you were both so much in love at the time. During your first marriage, I mean.”

“Our first marriage was one of convenience,” Evan said. “I wanted to keep her hard-working, brilliant mind near me as much as possible, and she needed my face for her most worthy cause of saving the rainforest.”

“So, you guys weren’t in love the first time around?” Godfrey asked.

Evan and I looked at each other, and it wasn’t scripted. We both smiled. I felt the warmth and affection coming out of his gaze and found the confidence to answer.

“We were too busy driving each other crazy to realize how much we were in love,” I replied.

The audience laughed, and Godfrey did as well.

“Oh man, I can totally relate. There are some days that my wife makes me want to tear what’s left of my hair out and run screaming into the wilderness.”

More laughter from the audience, though I didn't think what Godfrey had said was all that funny.

"Well, the love was always there. We just had to find out our way to it." I smiled up at Evan and then turned back to Godfrey. "I don't know what else I can say about it."

"So, the two of you are in love?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, and there was no chicanery there. Evan spontaneously leaned over and kissed me on top of the head. The audience responded with a chorus of 'awwws' that echoed through the theater.

"That's obvious to me and everyone else in here," Godfrey said with a nod. "But why the divorce the first time? If you were so much in love?"

"We were very much in love," Evan said "but we didn't know it. A whole lot of it was my fault. I didn't get it."

His jaw set hard, and I realized he was speaking from the heart. He was also ad-libbing, but I wasn't about to stop him.

"I thought that if I held myself apart from the rest of the world," Evan said, picking up momentum as he went "I would never be hurt. I thought that being an island would keep my heart safe. I wanted people to think I was a cold-hearted businessman, and I succeeded. I succeeded not only with the general public, but..."

He looked at me with hurt regret.

"But I succeeded in convincing my wife of that, too. You know what, though, Gordon?"

"What?" Godfrey asked right on cue.

“No man is an island. I can’t remember who said that quote off the top of my head, but it’s true. I thought I didn’t need anyone in my life. I thought that I was a self-made man, a kind of Ayn Rand antihero who could do it all on his own. But you know something? Nobody can do it on their own. Humans aren’t designed to live separately from each other. We’re designed to be together. Especially with the one we love.”

More ‘awwws’ from the audience. They were eating it up with a spoon, so to speak. I reached up to my shoulder and squeezed Evan’s hand affectionately. I so loved my husband in that moment, for speaking from the heart.

“And how about you?” Godfrey asked, addressing me. “How did the journey affect you?”

“Well,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I think that a lot of it was me learning to have more confidence in myself. I thought for the longest time I would never be anyone other than ‘the rich guy’s wife’, but Evan helped me believe in myself and live up to my full potential. And that...”

I looked up into his beautiful eyes.

“...is why I love him so much.”

Godfrey and the audience were digging it so hard, I almost felt bad.

“Splendid, splendid.” Godfrey moved on to the real reason we were on the show. “So, you guys have a charity that benefits the Amazon, right?”

And there we had it. I went into my spiel about how many square miles of the forest disappeared every year. I did the facts and figures. Evan did the emotional reactions and supplied hope in abundance. Our overall message was urgent, but upbeat. The world was in danger, but we still had a chance to put things right.

When we walked backstage after the interview, I scooped up my yawning toddler and held him to my hip. I no longer cared if he wrinkled up my dress or smudged my makeup.

“I think that went well,” Evan said.

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Pimping the charity, or your heartfelt confession?”

He laughed and kissed me tender.

“Both.”

The End.