



# Buying the Bride

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# Page 1

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1

Sylph

I should be looking through the job ads since rent is due faster than my bank account can keep up, but everything that I'm qualified for is either demeaning or doesn't pay enough. When the most promising thing I can find is a mascot at a burger shop, I decide to give my search a rest and look through travel magazines instead. One day I will go to Greece. It's my life's mission. I don't care what kind of job it requires to get there. I'm going to do it—even if that means dancing in a hamburger costume on main street.

Mandi, my roommate and best friend, walks in and plops down on the couch beside me. She looks worn out and stares at the blank TV screen with her brow furrowed.

We've been friends most of our lives, and surprisingly, we're still friends after rooming together for a year. She's the worst when it comes to cleaning up after herself, so I do it for her. Which is a fair trade considering she makes more money than I do and picks up my slack when I can't pull my weight with the bills. Weird thing is, I don't even know exactly what she does for a living. Whatever it is, she always has money. Lots of it. I've asked, but she always manages to skirt around the answer. My guess would be stripping. In the last year she's gotten breast and butt implants, her lips done, and hair extensions. Each time she gets some new augmentation, I ask her why, and she always says, "It's for work." What other kind of job requires that kind of upkeep?

I don't push her for answers because a. It's none of my business, and b. I don't want

her to feel ashamed.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, when she continues to sit there without saying anything.

“Oh, just work stuff.”

I raise my eyebrows as if to say, ‘That’s all you’ll give me?’

“Alright. If you want to talk about it, you know where to find me,” I say and get up to go to my room.

“Wait, Sylph.” I stop and turn to face her. She looks worried.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I need a big favor.”

I slowly walk back toward her and sit on the couch. The tone of her voice tells me I might not like what she has to ask. “With what?”

“Work stuff.”

My eyebrows shoot up. Is she finally going to reveal what she does for a living? A tendril of nervousness coils in my stomach. If I’m right, and she’s stripping for money, what could she possibly need my help with? I certainly don’t have the assets she has. I barely fill my B cup bra; my ass is shapely but small. I’m not exactly built for the kinds of things I fear she might ask me to do.

“What kind of work stuff?” I ask hesitantly.

She cringes, and now I’m scared. “The kind where you pretend to be married to

someone.”

I just sit here, blinking, wondering if I heard her right. “You want me to pretend to marry someone ...” I test out the words to see if they make sense when I say them out loud versus the way it sounds in my head. “... for money.”

This is a thing? I’ve never heard of it before and I can’t believe Mandi has kept it from me all this time.

Mandi shrugs. “Easy, right? And the pay is good.”

Just thought of marriage, pretend or otherwise, fills me with anxiety. I was married before, when I was eighteen. Divorced by the time I was nineteen. It left a bad taste in my mouth and I don’t ever want to go through anything like that ever again.

“I’m sorry, Mandi, I can’t.”

I start to stand, but she grabs my arm, her eyes pleading. I’ve never seen her desperate like this before.

“I know it sounds crazy, and I would never ask you to do something so bizarre if I weren’t absolutely desperate.”

“This is your job, pretending to marry people?”

“Believe it or not, it’s a high-demand business. And ten thousand dollars per week isn’t bad pay.”

I choke on nothing. There is literally nothing in my mouth and yet it feels like I swallowed a jawbreaker. “Ten thousand a week? That’s what these men pay you?”

All the things I could do with ten grand a week flash through my head. Mostly images of Greece come up, but there are other things too, like rent, and my phone bill, and food. I imagine stress-free days lounging on the couch instead job hunting. I can stretch 10k long enough to figure out what I'm going to do with my life.

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“How long do the jobs last?” I ask.

“A few weeks, usually.”

A few weeks. Again, my head is flooded with images of more money and less problems. How hard could it be to pretend to marry someone, unless ...

“Do you have to sleep with these men?”

“God, no. I’m not a prostitute. All you would have to do is meet with the guy, come up with a plan about your history together, meet the family or the people he’s trying to either impress or get off his back, have a pretend ceremony to make those people happy, then when the client is ready to exit the marriage, you part ways with a fat check in hand.”

“I guess that sounds easy enough,” I say.

Maybe too easy. The guy is probably a troll. Anyone who has to pay someone to pretend to be their fiancée must need a bag over his head to get laid, but I suppose that doesn’t matter. I don’t have to sleep with him. All I have to do is pretend to be his bride and I get paid more in a few weeks than I have in a year.

“I’m in,” I say. Though the money sounds amazing, I’m still skeptical. It sounds too good to be true.

Mandi squeals and wraps her arms around my neck in a bone-crushing hug. “Thank you so much. You’re saving my skin.”

Mandi goes over the client's information with me. Heath Starre is a billionaire heir for a huge international real estate development company. He's never been married, has never had a real girlfriend of any kind. I bet he looks like Lord Farquaad from Shrek: short, so hairy he would be shot in the woods during hunting season, and probably an honest-to-god asshole too. People with that kind of money don't have to be nice. All they have to do is wave some bills around and people will do whatever they want. I can already picture the kind of shit-show I'm getting myself into. I just have to keep my eye on the prize. I need that money. Do it for Greece, Sylph.

"You ready for this?" Mandi asks.

I shrug. What choice do I have? My job prospects are basically nothing and I'm drowning in debt. If I'm not careful, I'll find myself homeless, or worse, back at my parents' house. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"Good. I'll arrange a meeting for you at his office. He'll go over the details for the background of your relationship and the things he needs you to do going forward." She sounds far more excited about this than I feel.

"Okay." I square my shoulders and take a deep breath. "Let's do this."

2

Heath

I look down at my watch again. I'm surprisingly nervous about meeting with the woman who I've hired to be my make-believe wife. Her name is Sylph. It's a different name. I don't know if I've ever heard anything like it before. I wish I knew more about her going into this since I'm going to have to spend several weeks with her—or more, depending on how long my family decides to stay in town. I can't help but wonder what she looks like. Probably plastic. Big fake breasts, bleached hair, too

much makeup, too much surgery. Maybe I'm being too harsh or too judgmental about her looks, but that's just what I picture a girl-for-hire would look like. That might be what most men in my financial position prefer—a swimsuit model with a thirst for the finer things in life—but that's not what I'm interested in.

Those tend to be the types of women who throw themselves at me at any given time. I can't go to the gym or dinner with potential clients without women shoving their numbers in my pockets. Those aren't the kind of women I would ever dream of calling my wife. I want someone who's down to earth, who I can have actual conversations with, who sees more than a bank account when she looks at me. I'm starting to think maybe a woman like that doesn't exist.

Maybe this was a bad idea, hiring someone to pretend to be my wife. I got the idea from a friend of mine who hired a girl because his dying grandmother wanted to see him happy and married before she passed. He said the process was easy and the girl was reliable. But will she be a good enough actress to fool my family? By nature, my brother and sister—twins a couple years younger than me—are suspicious. Neither of them have real jobs, and they don't contribute one minute of their time to the family business, but they are very concerned about the money.



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Whenever I've had girlfriends in the past, the twins are always the first to interrogate her. I guess that's a good thing because they are like bloodhounds and have a knack for sniffing out gold diggers. But I know they don't do it out of the kindness of their hearts or to make sure their older brother isn't being taken advantage of. They're concerned about me getting married without a pre-nup and losing half my fortune to an ex. I'm the heir to my father's empire and when he dies, I will be in charge of their allowances and they want to make sure no one messes with that.

I straighten the papers on my desk, check my tie for the tenth time. When I look at my watch again, it's exactly ten. I take a deep breath. It's time.

3

Sylph

The man sitting behind the desk is not who I'm expecting. This can't be him, but this is the office the secretary led me to.

"Hi ..." I say timidly as I step into the pristine room. It's a stark gray space with a few shelves with books on them. One of the walls is a big blue print. Everything is modern and sleek, made with different metals and hardwoods. I feel under-dressed in my t-shirt and jeans. "I'm looking for Heath Starre. I think the secretary may have sent me to the wrong office."

The man behind the desk looks up at me. His blue eyes pierce through the shadows under his deep-set brow. His features are starkly handsome, a razor-cut jawline, straight nose, high cheekbones. It's the face of a demigod, a replica of Achilles cut

from marble. When he stands, I have to look up to meet his gaze. I doubt the top of my head would even reach his shoulders if I were standing right in front of him. He's wearing an immaculate gray suit with a blue tie that makes his blue eyes stand out even more. Even though he'd been sitting, there's not a single crease in his suit.

The more I look at him, the more intriguing things I find about his face, like the little dimple in his chin, and the scar on his right eyebrow that cuts it in half. His dark hair is combed back, not a single strand out of place. I've never really thought about men in suits being attractive. I've always preferred a more rugged man, I guess. Could be because that's what I'm used to. There weren't too many billionaire business men where I grew up. But damn, this man wears that suit well and he might very well be the sexiest man I've ever seen.

"I'm Heath, and you're late," he says.

I'm taken aback by the curtness of his words, though I'm not sure why I'm so surprised. He's so crisp and polished, it makes sense that his personality would be the same.

"Am I?" I look down at my phone screen. "It's only ten-oh-five."

"Our meeting was at ten."

I watch him carefully to try and figure out if he's joking. He's not.

"In business you're either on time or you're late. Half the time you're even late when you're on time. It's always best to be early," he says.

I wonder if that stick up his ass is made of platinum or gold.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I've only worked fast food. If you're late, you're still there before

your boss.” I smile and try to lighten the mood. This is not going at all how I expected. I was expecting him to be a hideous troll and that’s why he needed to pay for a bride. Now I see that it’s just his personality that keeps him single—definitely not his looks because he’s gorgeous.

I clear my throat when he presses his lips together, unmoved by my attempt at humor. He has probably never worked at a fast food restaurant and therefore wouldn’t understand.

“The bus was late this morning. It’s normally on time. It won’t happen again,” I say.

“Don’t you have a car?”

“Um, it’s in the shop. Is that going to be a problem?”

My car has actually been fixed for about a week now, but I couldn’t pay the mechanic, so he’s holding it hostage until I can come up with the money. I was planning on selling it once I got it back because insurance and gas are just more bills I can’t afford to pay.

“I’ll arrange for your transportation,” Heath says.

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“Or I could just catch the train instead. It’s just down the street from my apartment and it’s never late.”

I would’ve taken it, but it has this funk, a mix of body odor and grease traps that seeps into your clothes and is impossible to get out. I didn’t want to stink for our first meeting—I was saving that for the third and fourth meeting when it would be too late for him to back out.

“No,” he says. “Once we go public with our relationship, I don’t want anyone seeing you on public transportation. I have a certain image to uphold.”

Wow, what a snob. I wonder if he realizes how insulting that is to me. I’m guessing by the way his expression doesn’t change, he’s unaware. Oh well. He’s paying me, so it doesn’t really matter if he doesn’t think I’m good enough for his precious image.

He reaches behind his desk into a filing cabinet and pulls out a folder the size of a text book.

“I’ve compiled the details of our relationship. This is our history together. We need to go over a few things.”

“You want me to remember everything in this folder?”

“Yes.”

For real? I know I have a stricken look on my face, and I know through my rocky history in school that learning everything in that folder is going to be nearly

impossible for me, but I nod anyway and keep repeating ‘ten grand’ in my head over and over to comfort myself. When Mandi told me she had a job for me and then told me what that job would be, it sounded so easy. Just playing pretend. Like when I was a kid playing ‘house’, and there was the wife and the husband (usually a neighbor boy) and then we could get called in for dinner and go our separate ways. How hard could that be? But now it seems as though it’s actually work, and I’m going to have to earn every penny of that money.

He slides the folder toward me. I pick it up and thumb through the pages. He watches me carefully as I skim through the details. This is going to be harder than I thought. Everything in here is exotic and so beyond my life experience that I wouldn’t know the first steps in how to play the part of this girl he wants me to be.

As I turn the pages I see words like Cabo San Lucas, Carmel (not to be mistaken for caramel, which I’m very familiar with), Venice, and all these other places I’ve heard of but have never been to. I catch a glimpse of a page mentioning a Tiffany necklace he had made as a gift for me, and how we went scuba diving in the archipelagos of Con Son, Vietnam, and how he proposed to me on a fucking glacier near Juneau, Alaska. WTF is this life?

I feel like I might puke. According to this we met in Belize at a five-star restaurant I don’t know how to pronounce. We looked at each other and it was love at first sight. The very night we met, he whisked me off on his private jet to Quebec, Canada where we ate strange, exotic food and made love every night. I’m really hoping that is just part of this story and not something I’m supposed to tell his family. There’s no way I’m talking about my sex life with anyone’s parents, even if it is a fake sex life.

Says here I’m an assistant to a major fashion designer (he has a friend who will vouch for this if questions are asked) and enjoy the finer things in life. Only problem with that is I don’t even know what the finer things in life are to him. I know what that means to me: splurging on a lipstick at Sephora once in a while instead of Walgreens

where I usually buy my makeup, and celebrating at Trujillo's on special occasions with a \$12 margarita. I have a feeling our definition of 'finer things' are worlds apart. I'm a simple girl from a simple town in Northern California where my family raised sheep on a farm and I spent my childhood barefoot in treehouses.

Regretfully, I put the folder down. "I don't think I'll be able to do this job, I'm sorry."

His eyes narrow. "Why not?"

"I don't know how to be this girl." I point to the folder. "I've never even been out of California."

He leans forward, clasping his hands together. God, he's beautiful. It's almost uncomfortable being this close to him. I feel the same way in museums and art galleries, like I might taint a painting's perfection by standing too close to it.

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“It will be impossible for me to find another girl on short notice. I’m a business man, I know how to negotiate. So let’s come up with a story together that we can both be satisfied with. How do you think our first date might have gone?”

For me to even pretend to marry someone, our backstory would have to be romantic. It wasn’t with my first husband. We were thrown together by mutual friends on a blind date and we had a few things in common. I didn’t think he was all that handsome when I first met him—definitely not love at first sight, or even, hmm, he’s kind of cute at first sight. In reality, I didn’t like the way he looked. He was a couple inches shorter than me. He chewed tobacco, so his teeth were stained and his gums were receding so it made his teeth look way too long. There was something false about his smile, the way it never reached his eyes. I should’ve known something was up with his personality during our first date when he kept complaining about his food and sending it back to the kitchen. How he talked down to our waitress, then left only a penny for a tip after threatening to not pay the bill.

Back then I thought he was a perfectionist, and that a man like that gets things done. I thought a man like that would be a good provider. I was wrong. In the short year that we were married, he’d been fired from three jobs and developed a bit of a drinking problem.

“Well,” I say, trying to think of a scenario that was both plausible and romantic, “I suppose your job is stressful, so one day you decide to take a walk in the park to unwind.” He leans back in his chair, arms folded in front of him as he listens.

I continue. “And I was in the park too. I’d been house sitting for a friend and was walking her unruly dogs when one of them got loose. You, seeing someone in

distress, managed to wrangle the cocker spaniel and bring him back to me. I pay back your kindness by buying you a hotdog at a cart, and we end up talking all night under the stars.”

I can hear the whimsy in my voice. Even though marriage is the worst thing that has ever happened to me, I’m not immune to romance.

Heath smiles, and when he does, it changes everything about his face. It’s bright and warm, and the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. His stiff demeanor starts to crumble and there’s actually a human under there somewhere. My neck grows warm and I’m sure I’m blushing. I wonder if he has any idea the kind of power that smile possesses. I’m sure he does. I imagine a man like him probably has his fair share of lovers.

Suddenly I’m picturing myself as one of them, sprawled out naked on some ridiculously expensive bed, letting him have his way with me. I picture those nice full lips against mine, that hard body pressed against me ...

I shake my head to clear those thoughts. Is the heater running in here? I’m starting to sweat. I need to stay focused. This is a job, not Match.com.

This guy is borderline perfect. Why does he need to hire someone? The whole thing is a mystery to me and makes me want to get to know him better.

“There are a few holes in that story,” he says.

“Really, like what?”

“To start, I would never eat food from a cart.”

“What?” I say aghast. “You haven’t lived until you’ve had a hotdog from a cart.



What else?"

"Nor would I chase dogs, or be in the park at all. While, yes, my job can be stressful, everyone knows I thrive on a challenge and I never let anything get to me."

"Surly you like fresh air."

He nods. "I do."

"Then you went out for fresh air. And I have a feeling if you saw someone in distress you would help them. Even if it involved chasing dogs."

The taut skin around his eyes softens and he lets out an amused breath, but doesn't confirm nor deny it. I know I'm right. Even through his stiff demeanor, his eyes are gentle. There's something kind about him. Eyes don't lie. It's everything else in a man that does. That's the one thing my ex never had: kind eyes. Sometimes his words were as sweet as cookie dough, but there was always something malicious about the way he looked at me, even when we were at our best.

"Are you busy?" I ask Heath.

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“Yes, we’re having a meeting.”

“Can this meeting be moved outside?” I ask.

He hesitates but seems too curious to say no. “I suppose that would be all right.”

“Let’s go,” I say.

To my surprise he follows me. He seems like the kind of guy who never deviates from a schedule, but here we are.

As we walk by different offices and desks, people crane their heads to look at us and seem very curious about my presence. Though I’m sure he gets plenty of action—I mean, look at him, he’s beyond beautiful! —maybe he keeps that part of his life private from the people who work below him and that’s why they seem surprised to see him with a woman.

Walking next to him, he seems even taller than he did in his office. He seems bigger than life. A big fish in a tiny world made just for him. The jealous way women look at me as we walk by gives me a sense of pride, though I’m not sure why. It’s not like Heath and I are actually a couple. I guess being next to him makes me feel like an actual fish when normally I’m a flake of algae just trying to make it in a world too big for me.

“What are we doing?” he keeps asking. He changes the wording when I don’t give him the answer that he wants, but it’s all the same question.

Once we're outside, I finally give him an answer he can chew on. "Falling in love," I say.

He looks at me as though I've just struck him with a bat. I laugh. "Don't worry, it doesn't hurt," I tell him.

He shakes his head, the skeptical look on his face growing more concerned as we head further away from his office building. It's a beautiful day out, overcast, and a slight cool breeze. Perfect day to walk the dogs if there were any around, but since I don't have dogs at my disposal, I'll just have to make do with what I have—or don't have, I should say.

We head into the park and I watch the moment when realization starts to dawn on him. "I see," he says. "I thought you were luring me away to knock me over the head and take my wallet."

"And you followed me anyway?"

He gives me a dismissive glance. "I've got a hundred pounds on you, I'm sure I could take you in a fight."

The corner of his mouth twitches. Is this stuffed business suit actually being adorable right now? I wasn't sure he was capable of it. Maybe this job won't be so difficult after all.

"Fighting isn't always about brawn. There are other ways for a woman to overpower a man," I say.

I stop abruptly and turn to face him. I put my hand against his chest, touching the smooth buttons of his jacket, running my fingers along the stiff fabric. Even through his jacket I can tell there's nothing soft about this man's body. I start to wonder what

he looks like without the suit. It starts out innocent enough. I'm just imagining him in other clothes. Normal clothes that an everyday man would wear on the street: t-shirt and jeans. It's a difficult image to hold onto because he seems made of this suit, like he was born wearing it. Then my thoughts start to steer slightly toward the gutter. This is where my imagination likes to run wild. Now I'm thinking about him being naked, my hands and lips exploring his impeccable body. I have a feeling his skin is soft, but nothing else about him is.

Heath stiffens beneath my touch and my mind comes back into focus. He's watching me, his eyes burning. My hand moves to his stomach. More hard body beneath. When I reach out with my other hand and bring it up to his neck, to his jaw, feeling the shadow of stubble, and rub my thumb against those impossibly soft lips, his entire body shudders. He starts to reach out to touch me too, but I abruptly step out of his reach. His eyes are wide, confused, and his breathing comes out in short bursts.

"What was that?" he asks huskily.

"Just proving I don't need a bunch of muscle to take you down," I say breezily and fall into step beside him like nothing ever happened.

He lets out a long breath, then a chuckle follows. "Remind me not to follow you into the woods."

I laugh and take his hand, leading him to the other side of the park. His skin is warm, his large hand envelopes mine. He smells amazing, and without even knowing the brand, I know whatever cologne he wears is expensive. It's not offensive like the cheap stuff; it's subtle.

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“Where are we going now?” he asks.

I point at the hotdog cart in the distance. “Lunch.”

“No, I’m not eating—”

“Live a little,” I tell him.

I’m dragging him now, and I’m laughing because he’s being such a child about it, like trying to force-feed a toddler spinach.

“I would never dream of taking a date to a hotdog cart for our first meal,” he says.

“It’s not a date. This is me thanking you for saving my friend’s dogs, and me from having to tell her I lost them. Don’t be so stubborn.”

He rolls his eyes, but eventually relents. “Two hotdogs, please,” I tell the vendor.

Heath reaches for the wallet in the inside pocket of his jacket, but I stop him. “I’m treating you, remember.”

Letting me pay seems to be the hardest part of this task for him, but eventually I convince him to put his wallet away.

“Man, do women usually have to put this much effort into wooing you?” I ask.

He chuckles at the word ‘wooing.’ I do too. It’s a dumb word, but we both know what

I'm getting at.

"I wouldn't know. I don't date," he says.

Of course he doesn't. If he did, he might actually have found love instead of paying for a fake bride. Sucks for all the women out there. I'm sure there are plenty who would love to get their acrylic nails into a man of his stature.

"Why not? You're handsome, smart, tall, sexy as hell, a hard worker. Any woman would fall all over themselves to be with you." I motion to the women around us. As if on cue, a woman jogging nearby is paying too much attention to Heath and not to the trail in front of her. She strips and stumbles forward, but manages to catch herself before she falls. I let out a really un-ladylike snort, and Heath bites his lip to keep from laughing. The girl jogs off, red-faced.

"Poor thing, that's so embarrassing," I say. "But it just goes to prove my point. You can have any woman you want. So why don't you date?"

He's still smiling when he looks at me, and I have to tuck my heart away, force it down deep inside to protect it. I could fall for a smile like that. He could snatch it right out of my chest and it would be his forever if I'm not careful.

"I've dated once or twice, but it's difficult for women to see beyond my money."

"Maybe because you don't open yourself up. You're so stiff."

The vendor hands us our hotdogs. I load mine up with a sloppy squiggle of mustard. Heath makes a perfectly straight line on his. I can't help but giggle.

"What?" he says.

I point at the mess I've made, and to his straight line. "I feel like this might be a perfect representation of us." I put my hotdog on top of his to mess up his mustard line, and now they are equally messy. "There, that's better," I say. "Now eat."

He stares at the hotdog like it's going to bite him back. After some coaxing on my part, he finally takes a bite and his eyes literally roll in the back of his head. "Good, right?" I say.

"This might actually be the best thing I've ever eaten," he says.

"I can't believe you've never had a hotdog from a cart. Didn't your dad ever take you to baseball games?"

The delirious euphoria his taste buds had been experiencing is cut short by the mention of his dad. "No. He's not exactly a baseball kind of man, or a spend-time-with-your-kid kind of man. You'll understand when you finally meet him."

I press my lips together. "Great, can't wait."

We continue to walk and he eagerly enjoys his hotdog in silence. I've barely taken a bite of mine. I'm too busy watching him. It's weird, but I like watching him eat, the way his jaw flexes, the way he makes these contented little sighs. He glances at the uneaten hotdog in my hand.

"You gonna eat that?" he asks.

I hand it over and smile. "Have at it, buddy."

We continue to walk and our conversation comes surprisingly easy.

"What kind of name is Sylph?" he asks.

“A Sylph is a mythological spirit of the air.” I shrug. “My mom can get a little earthy sometimes. Probably comes from living on a farm where everything is organic.”



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He asks more questions about my family after that and is surprised to learn that my parents have been together nearly thirty years and are still madly in love with one another. He tells me his parents haven't even slept in the same room together since he was in high school

I learn more about him on our walk than I ever would have learned by reading his folder full of facts. He's surprisingly funny and charming, and sarcastic. I keep giggling like an idiot. What is happening? I wasn't supposed to like him. I've never been attracted to the wealthy and privileged. So why does being in his presence have my stomach tangled in knots? Where the hell did all these butterflies come from? This isn't good.

"My turn to ask questions," I say.

"Go for it."

"Is anything off limits?"

He takes a moment to think about it. "No. I'm an open book. Ask whatever you want."

"What do you like in bed?" I ask boldly.

His eyebrows shoot up on his forehead like a cartoon character. There's something very gratifying about breaking the calm mask he wears.

"If I'm to pretend to be married to you, these are the sorts of things I'm going to need

to know,” I say matter-of-factly, keeping it very business-like.

He bites back a smile. “I’m fairly certain none of my friends or family will ask you questions about our sex life.”

“I would hope not, but we’re supposed to be getting married, which means we’ve more than likely been intimate—unless, of course, you’re an old fashioned guy who waits wants to wait until marriage.”

“Definitely not,” he says.

“Okay. People who have been intimate with each other carry themselves a certain way. They’re comfortable around each other. I should at least know what you like in bed. It’s hard to be uncomfortable and stiff around someone after they know all your bedroom secrets.”

He gives me a lopsided smile and nods. “I guess that makes sense. Well, um, I’m a man, so being touched is usually good enough.” His laughter turns my insides to cotton candy. I love the sound of it. I like the sound of his voice too. No too high, not too deep. It’s just the most perfect, soothing sound to listen to. I would love to just hear him tell stories or talk about his day. “I really don’t have any preferences as to what I want a woman to do in bed, but I have to say I’m attracted to a confident girl, someone who’s not ashamed of her body or showing it to me in all of its glory.”

I feel my neck growing warm. I bet I’m blushing.

“What about you?” he asks. “What do you like in bed?”

“I tend to like a little bit of everything. I like sweet and tender love-making, but I also like a good spanking now and then. And I like it when things get messy, don’t you?”

He looks me square in the eye and says, “Messy is good.”

Now know I’m blushing. I feel like my entire body has just been dipped into a hot tub. At least I’m not the only one turned on by this conversation. He tries to subtly adjust himself, but he’s not fooling me one bit.

Now I’m picturing us together, sweat, lube, cum, messy. I let out a shaky breath. Messy is definitely good.

The sun starts to go down. I change the subject because talking about sex with Heath is dangerous. We stop next at the wharf and look out at the dock. Sea lions pile on top of each other and make a sound similar to barking dogs. Seagulls are perched on posts, making equally obnoxious noises, but I love the sound of it. All of it. The ocean is my favorite place to be. It really is romantic out here and it’s hard not to get swept up in this moment with Heath, even if it isn’t real.

“So, how was this for a first meeting?” I ask.

The last of the sun lights up his dark hair, and his gaze finds mine. It’s impossible not to feel special when those vibrant blue eyes are focused only on me. I melt beneath their heat and fear the dreamy look I feel on my face is giving away all my secrets.

“Surprisingly perfect,” he says

“Now we won’t have to lie about how we met.”

He nods. “So now we’re in love.”

“Not yet.”

His eyebrows push together. “If I remember your version of our story right, I thought

we fell in love on this date.”

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“We do, but it’s not finished.”

I reach up and cup his face in my hands, bringing him down to my level. I’m insane. I’ve completely lost my mind. I shouldn’t be doing this. But the more I think about it, the more I want it, and I know if I don’t kiss him right now, I’ll regret it.

His hands grip my waist, pulling me against him. The anticipation makes me light headed as his eyes flicker toward my lips. I lift my chin. The tip of his tongue brushes against his bottom lip, wetting it. The thought of tasting those perfect lips makes my stomach flutter.

Our lips gently come together, soft and slow, tasting, testing each other out. He opens his mouth slightly and I open mine. Just the tips of our tongues touch in a shy greeting, but it doesn’t take long for the heat between us to catch fire and suddenly we’re engulfed.

I breathe him in, that expensive scent I will always associate with him from now on. I remember the softness of his tongue, the taste of his lips. I try to memorize every little thing about this perfect moment to keep with me forever. Put it in my pocket and pull it out whenever I need to feel beautiful and wanted. That’s how I feel when he kisses me. I know this whole marriage is a sham, but this kiss isn’t. No one can fake a kiss like this.

Heath’s fingers dig into the skin of my lower back, our hips pressed so tightly together that one of us is either going to turn into a diamond or our bodies are going to merge into one.

His tongue is soft, but eager. I pull my hands through his hair, and there's something entirely fulfilling about messing it up. He doesn't seem to mind getting messy with me. Like he said, messy is good. He's hard for me. I can feel him pressed against my stomach, and it's delightfully painful. I'm wet for him, but he can't feel that. By the way I devour his mouth, I'm sure he knows.

We finally pull away when we hear voices nearby. A couple of older women walk past us, giggling to each other. Heath doesn't seem bothered by getting caught. His eyes still have that hungry look in them, but it's obvious that he's restraining himself. He reaches up to tame his hair. Even after he manages to press it back into a similar shape that it was before I destroyed it, there's still something tousled about it. That perfect coif won't stand a chance when all of our clothes are off.

The thought startles me a moment, and I have to remember this isn't an actual date. I'm not here to sleep with him. This is a job I'm being paid to do, and I am NOT a prostitute.

Heath lets out a slow, shaky breath and smooths down his wrinkled suit jacket. "Now we're love?"

I nod. "Yep, that's when we fell in love."

His smile cuts me off at the knees. I want nothing more than to fly back into his arms and kiss him again. "Good. Now I have the details straight. This was an acceptable first meeting," he says.

"Perfectly acceptable," I say, that feeling in my core still raging. By the large mound tenting his suit pants, I'd say he's still feeling it too.

I'm definitely going to need a cold shower and dry panties after this encounter.

## Heath

The part of me that planned to keep Sylph at a distance has started to crumble. I wasn't supposed to like her, let alone want to kiss her, and especially nothing more than that. She wasn't at all what I was expecting.

When I think of a fake bride putting themselves out there for sale, I think of someone more expensive-looking—not more beautiful, of course. I don't think there is anyone on this earth who is more naturally beautiful than Sylph. The type of expensive I'm talking about involves a lot of faux parts: sexy designer clothes, someone who indulges in surgery and too much makeup to keep themselves looking high-end, someone who flaunts her body and gives a man hungry eyes to get what she wants. Those sorts of tactics may work on some rich men, but not me. Most of those men don't care. They know that if they didn't have the appeal of money on their side, a woman who looked like that wouldn't give them the time of day. And yet they don't care. I've had women like that approach me many times in restaurants and bars. I know the type—that kind of girl just doesn't happen to be my type.

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I guess that's why I wasn't prepared for Sylph. She's everything I could want in a girl. Nothing about her screams gold-digger to me. Though her clothes were clean and nice, and looked incredible on her, they were cheap and meant to look casual. Instead of an even spray tan, her skin had just a hint of color left over from summer on the high points of her forehead and nose, the way it occurs naturally. Also natural, were the streaks in her blonde hair, not something even the best beautician can reproduce in a salon. Her nails were short and painted a pastel green color, barely any makeup, but what she did have on was flattering. Jeans and a t-shirt are hardly the outfit a woman would wear if she were trying to get her hooks into a man for his money.

It's almost as if she'd shown up on a whim. My friend who'd recommended her didn't describe her this way. He said she could be Snow White: pale skin, black hair, big red lips, and giant breasts. He'd said this with a wolfish grin, but all I was concerned about was my family believing this could be a girl I would marry. Sylph is definitely not the girl my friend described to me. So who is she?

As I walk up the stairs and back to my office to finish my work, I'm having trouble focusing. My thoughts keep drifting back to Sylph. Her eyes were the softest pale blue, the color of shadow on snow. They were quite startling, actually. I'm not used to being taken off my guard simply from a glance. Not only that, but she was charming and real. Had I not known her services were being paid for, I truly would have believed she was falling for me. I guess that's a good thing, because my family will need to believe it as well, and they aren't nearly as easy to convince as I am. If anyone can get the job done, it's Sylph.



Sylph

I know the date that happened between me and Heath yesterday was just part of the act, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit there was something there. He was so gorgeous, nothing at all like I had imagined. He could have any woman in the world, so why would he possibly need to pay someone to pretend to be his bride? I'm glad he did, though. This is going to be the easiest job I've ever had, wrapped around the arm of a man who is handsome and surprisingly fun to talk to once you get past his rough, suspicious façade.

I find myself eager to see him again. I'll have to tamp down those feelings, though; this is a job, not a real marriage. A real marriage will never happen, not after the horrible experience I had with my ex.

To get thoughts of Heath and our kiss out of my head for the moment, I decide to make myself a bowl of cereal and study the folder Heath gave me. I need to learn everything I can about his family and friends, the things I'll need to know if this engagement is going to be believable. His family lives overseas in Europe where his father runs the headquarters of their family business. Says here his mother is kind, but naïve, his father is rougher around the edges. It says he's severe and quiet. Heath also has younger twin siblings who can be somewhat suspicious and intrusive. That doesn't help my nerves at all.

I sit back and rub my eyes. There's so much to memorize. It feels like my brain has locked up. I need coffee.

There's a knock at the door. I figure it's probably a delivery man since Mandi has something sent to the apartment daily. I get up to open the door, but it's not a delivery man. It's Heath.

"Oh," I say, surprised. This is not how I wanted him to see me. I'm wearing cut-off

sweats and a tank top I slept in with no bra. The messy knot of hair piled on top of my head hasn't been washed in two days. Thank God I shaved my legs and gave myself a pedicure, or this encounter would be a lot more embarrassing. Still, he's so crisply dressed, his perfectly coifed hair looking as if it came out of a mold. I feel even more disheveled than I would if he were in casual clothes.

"Did we have a meeting?" I ask. He doesn't seem like the type to just show up unannounced.

He has that same stern look he wore when we first met, as if he's already shed away the thought of our wonderful first date. I don't know why that bothers me so much, but it does. Part of me feels kind of hurt by the brushoff.

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His eyes flicker to my breasts, then, reluctantly, back up to my eyes. I feel the slight twinge of pleasure as they harden from the attention. Normally, if someone came over, I would try to hide it. But I like the idea of torturing him a bit.

“No, I’m just stopping by to bring your transportation,” he says.

I’m confused and, for a moment, flirting with him takes a back seat. When he told me I wouldn’t be able to take public transportation during this job, I’d assumed he would send a company car for me like he did yesterday when he sent me home after our meeting/date.

His big body blocks the doorway, so I can’t see what he’s talking about at first until he steps to the side. Sitting in front of my dingy apartment is a sleek black something or other—I’ve never seen anything like it before. I’m pretty sure it’s a car—or maybe a spaceship. I’m certain it’s not something you can pick up off the lot at the auto mall.

“Is that ...” My words trail off when he hands me a key fob that has the word Maybach on it. Is he for real? “There’s no way I’m driving that,” I tell him.

His eyebrows come together and his head tilts. “Why not, is there something better you’d rather drive?”

I laugh. I can’t help myself. He puts his hands on his hips, not looking amused.

“Better?” I say. “Is there such thing as a better car?”

“I’m sure there is,” he says.

I shake my head. “No, I don’t think there is. It’s just ... I don’t know ... a bit excessive, don’t you think? That’s a half-million-dollar car.”

The only reason why I know that is because Mandi is addicted to reality TV and the mother of the Kardashian girls drives something similar.

“You’re my betrothed,” Heath says. “I can’t have you driving around in a Toyota Corolla covered in rust spots. There’s a certain image we have to uphold.”

“How do you know what kind of car I drive?” I ask, taken aback by his knowledge of me.

“I did some research after we met.”

“I like my Toyota,” I say, a little offended by his remark, and a lot offended that he’s been spying on me.

I don’t actually like my Toyota. The thing is a money pit and makes this god-awful squeal as I drive down the road. It’s embarrassing, really. But so is driving around in a Maybach. I don’t want people staring at me. I’ll get self-conscious and end up rear-ending someone, or doing something embarrassing.

“What about a compromise then?” he says.

“A compromise is good. That’s what marriage is all about,” I say.

He gives me a surprised look.

“What?” I say.

“Nothing ... I guess I’m just surprised how seriously you’re taking this whole marriage thing.”

“I have excellent work ethic. You’re paying me to be your bride and I plan to be the best damn wife a man has ever had.”

He still looks bewildered, but he shows me a slight smile and continues. “What kind of car would you prefer to have?”

“What about a newer Toyota. They’re reliable, efficient, get great gas mileage. There’s a little used car lot down the road—”

“No,” he says bluntly.

This time I’m the one with my hands on my hips. “This doesn’t sound like compromise to me.”

“You do realize that any other woman in your position would be jumping at the chance to drive a Maybach?”

“I’m not any other woman. I’m me.”

“I’ve noticed. You’re not like the women I’m used to.”

Is that an insult or a compliment? It’s hard to tell with his expressionless demeanor.

“Maybe you should find yourself a different caliber of woman then, because anyone who would ask you for a Maybach cares only about your money,” I say.

He looks at me like a puzzle he can’t quite piece together. “Isn’t that what you care about as well?”

“No, of course not. I mean, well ...” I’m getting flustered. “Yes, I care about your money, because I’m doing a job and you’re paying me for my services. But if we were actually dating, your money would have nothing to do with it. My last—” I almost said husband—not that it’s a secret (he probably already knows after spying on me), I just don’t like telling people the reason I’m no longer married. “—boyfriend, worked as a short haul truck driver. Not exactly the kind of job that makes millions. When I’m with someone it’s because they make me happy.”

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“Good to know,” he says and manages to swing the subject back around to the car issue. “A Mercedes then.”

“No way. That’s like putting a target on my back and being like, ‘Hey, look at all this money I have, come car-jack me.’”

“Maybe in this neighborhood, but not in mine.”

“Definitely in this neighborhood. That’s why I need something a little more inconspicuous.”

“That’s why you’re moving in with me,” he says.

I freeze. Did I just hear him right?

“You want me to move in with you?”

“Yes. I need you to stay with me while my family is in town. You’ll have your own wing if you need your privacy.”

His place is big enough for me to have my own wing? I don’t even know if I’ve ever been in a place with a wing.

“Keep the car for now,” he says, “and I’ll work on getting you something different. In the meantime, I want to show you your new living arrangements.”

I can’t help but get a little excited. Mandi is my best friend, but she makes a terrible

roommate. The thought of having a wing to myself, even if it is temporary, is a wonderful thought. I can finally get to that stack of books I've been meaning to read but never had the chance because Mandi comes home at weird hours and always has the TV on at full volume. The possibilities are endless.

Heath makes me drive the Maybach because he doesn't like driving. Apparently he's used to being driven around in his company car everywhere he goes. That's fine by me. I'm less nervous about driving the car after he tells me he has amazing insurance. I believe him since I doubt a dealership would let him drive this thing off the lot without it. I finally settle down and just enjoy the ride. It looks like a cockpit inside with all the different lights. The supple leather seats are like butter and fit my ass just right. No wonder this car is so expensive. Worth every penny.

We pull up to a tower of luxury condos. There's a circular covered drive and a row of valets waiting out front. The only thing close to a valet at my apartment complex is the thug on the corner waiting to jack it.

One of the men wearing a suit and tie comes up to us. "Good morning, Mr. Starre," he says.

Heath hands him a one-hundred-dollar bill. "This is Sylph, my fiancée. I want you to make sure her car is well taken care of."

"Yes, sir," the man says and jogs over to where I'm getting out of the driver's seat.

If that's how much valets make in tips, I see a career change in my future once this deal with Heath is over.

Heath leads me into the building. The foyer opens up into a hall with a grand staircase, and pillars all around. There's a fountain in the middle and a lounge area with a coffee bar. Everyone who works in the complex seems to know Heath's name



and has a smile waiting for him. It's like I'm in that scene in *Pretty Woman* where everyone is staring at Julia Roberts because it's so obvious she's a prostitute by the way she's dressed. Except I'm not dressed like a prostitute. My ensemble leans more toward homelessness. Before Heath had shown up, I was doing my laundry and all I had left to wear were a tank top, sweats, and ballet flats. Heath has to be embarrassed to be seen with me looking like this, especially since he seems to be so into his image and status. But if he is embarrassed, he isn't showing it.

Everything in the lobby, from the wallpaper, to the furniture, is accented in gold. The art on the walls look suspiciously like the real thing. I want to take it all in, examine the different brush strokes, the soft carpet, everything, but Heath seems to be in a hurry. This is by far the fanciest building I've ever been inside aside from a museum.

We get into an elevator. It's super fancy inside with ornate detailed wood carvings and gold leafing. It's a cramped space. Heath's arm touches my breast. He looks down at it. Every time he gives me any kind of attention, my nipples stand at attention. I know he sees where his arm is touching me, but he doesn't move it. I don't move either. How does this man manage to turn me on with just a single touch?

He clears his throat. "Have you had a chance to look over the folder more?" he asks. His rich velvet voice fills the space in the elevator.

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“Stayed up all night going through it,” I admit. There was a lot, and it was strange reading about a life that is supposed to be mine yet I’ve never experienced any of it. I found myself wishing I was that girl who went to wine tastings with him in Napa Valley, who sat on the rooftop of the apartment building watching the sunset. The girl in that folder is happy and carefree. She has a man who loves her dearly and who also respects her. She doesn’t have to scrimp and save every penny just to survive on toxic food or suffer through an equally toxic relationship. She’s able to go and do things, experience life on a whole different level. Must be nice to live like the girl I’m pretending to be.

“Good. You’ll be meeting my family tomorrow night,” Heath says.

“What? Already?” For some reason I thought I’d have a little more time to prepare, to perfect my character. I don’t know how to be a wealthy person. There are rules, mannerisms. Rich people hold themselves a specific way, head up, chin out. And there’s a certain arrogance to them that comes from either getting too much attention as a child, or not enough. At this point his family will never believe that I am anything more than who I am: a jobless, penniless, desperate girl pretending to be in love with a man who has more money than God.

“I’m afraid so. They got into town earlier than I was expecting,” he says.

My head’s spinning. The elevator feels like it’s moving at warp speed. I sway. Heath catches me before my knees buckle and he holds me in his sturdy arms. Damn, he smells good. I put my forehead against his chest to keep the elevator car from going in circles.

He starts to stroke my hair. It feels good and comforting. One of his hands slips down to my bare shoulders. My body comes alive from his touch and I find myself with temporary amnesia. I'm no longer thinking about his family or my duties. Right now, all I know is that he's touching me and I want more.

Then the elevator opens, and he steps away from me. "Are you all right?" he asks.

I nod. "I'm fine."

We step out of the elevator which leads us directly into the condo. This place is as big as two houses. Windows wrap around, giving us a stunning panoramic view of the city below. The floors are white polished marble tile. The furniture is also white. The leather couches are all straight lines and hard edges. They're beautiful but don't look like they'd be very comfortable to sit on.

The wallpapered walls are covered in beautiful art pieces just like in the lobby. This entire place looks like an art piece. That, or a showroom. I can't believe people actually live like this.

He gives me the grand tour, which is definitely grand. In the wing he's calling mine, there's even a library. I feel just like Belle from Beauty and the Beast—if the beast were the sexiest man alive.

"What's mine is yours. As long as you're working for me, you have free rein of the place."

His smile stirs that needy place deep in my core and I find myself imagining him walking around this place wearing nothing but that sexy smile.

"Thank you," I say.

I ask myself yet again why this gorgeous man is pretending to be engaged and getting married when he could have the real thing with any woman of his choosing. He's beautiful, obviously brilliant to have gotten this far in life. He doesn't need to pretend.

"Is it off-limits to ask why you need a fake bride? Clearly you don't need one. You're gorgeous, and smart, and kind ..."

His eyebrows lift and I blush.

"I'm almost thirty-years-old and my mother thinks I'm lonely and she's always trying to set me up with someone, so any possible free night I might have is spent on mindless dates trying to pretend to be interested in some pampered brat's little purse dog. My father thinks a man without a wife is irresponsible and not planning well enough for the future. He's constantly checking up on me. I just want them off my back for once in my life. I figure if they think I'm married, they'll leave me alone. They live out of the country and I rarely see them, so they won't know the difference for some time. When they come back, I'll give them some sob story about how things didn't work with my marriage, and hopefully that will be the end of their meddling," he says.

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“You’ve really thought this through.” Of course he did. He’s very good at details. It’s obvious from the folder he’s given me.

“I should get back to work,” he says.

“Do you need me to drive you back?”

“I’ll call for a car.”

I swallow hard. “I don’t suppose you’d want to stay and hang out with me for a while.”

He looks curiously at me. I continue. “We could watch TV, binge-watch something on Netflix.”

His curiosity turns to amusement. “You want to spend time with me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I want to hear more about your family. I’m nervous about meeting them.”

“You’re nervous? Aren’t you used to this sort of thing since it’s your job?”

I shake my head. “This isn’t my normal job. I’m just filling in for my best friend. She needed my help at the last minute and I needed the money, so I said yes.”

He gives me the strangest look, a mixture of surprise and understanding. Suddenly, his whole body language changes and his stiff demeanor crumbles.

“It all makes sense now. You don’t seem like the type to do this sort of thing. And you don’t look anything like the way my friend said you would.”

“Disappointed?”

“Not at all. Elated, actually. I was worried someone might recognize you from one of your other jobs.”

“Not unless that job was the cashier at Burger Hut.”

“I’m fairly certain I don’t know anyone who eats at Burger Hut.”

“Didn’t think so,” I say.

I press my hands together and give him a pleading look. “So you’ll stay?”

“For a little while.” He sits on the couch. I sit next to him.

“You look so uncomfortable in all those stiff clothes,” I say.

He looks down at his buttoned jacket. “This particular suit isn’t made for comfort.”

“I can tell, but it looks sexy as hell on you, so I guess that makes it worth it.”

He gives me a sideways smile and takes his jacket off.

“This needs to go too.” I lean toward him and take off his tie and unbutton the top button of his shirt to let his neck breathe. He pulls in a breath. When I look at him to

see why, I realize my tank top is gaping and he can see everything. I pretend like I don't notice, and let him get an eyeful. He doesn't say anything, and doesn't try to avert his gaze.

"You smell amazing," I blurt out. I was thinking it, but hadn't meant to say it out loud. Too late now. "What's that scent?"

"Dolce and Gabbana."

His brilliant blue eyes finally leave my breasts and now they seem to search my face. They leave a sizzling trail from my eyes to my lips.

Please don't stare at me like that. I can't think straight when you stare at me like that.

My breathing is erratic. I can hear it. I know he can hear it too. I try to slow it down, to take even breaths, but it's not working.

Our eyes meet and though I know I should look away, neither of us seem to be willing, or even able to. Before I realize it, I have four of his shirt buttons undone. A small patch of hair on his chest shows through. I want to touch it so bad. He touches my arm and I jump a little. His fingers trace a line along the skin of my arm, down to my fingertips. His fingers weave together with mine and now he's holding my hand.

"There's nothing to be nervous about when it comes to my family. If they do or say anything to make you feel bad, you let me know and I'll put them in their place."

I look down at his hand holding mine and bring it up to my lips. His breathing changes too. I kiss each tip of his fingers, my lips lingering on the last one. His hands smell like soap.

"Is this part of our story?" he asks in a voice that seems off kilter.

I nod. “The more we bond, the more convincing our relationship will seem. Don’t you think? Then I won’t have to be nervous about meeting them and trying to make them believe we’re a couple.”

He nods. “Yes, that’s a good strategy.” He hesitates. “But maybe it’s not a good idea.”

“Why not?”



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“Because I’m your employer. You’re dependent on the money for this job. It’s not a fair distribution of power.”

I grin. “That’s very thoughtful of you to care, but I don’t give a shit. I want you.” I undo the rest of the buttons and open his shirt. He groans in a way that makes me think he’s having an inner moral struggle but losing the battle of wills.

“And I’m pretty sure you want me, too,” I say.

He struggles to keep eye contact, but his gaze keeps finding the gap in my shirt.

I’m not going to make it easy for him to say no to me. I take off my tank top and now he can’t even pretend not to look. His eyes drink me in, pupils dilating. I use my shirt to tie his wrists together.

“There, now I have the power. Does this make you feel better?” I ask.

His low chuckle and sweet smile do things to my body I didn’t know were possible. “It does make me feel better, actually,” he says.

“Good.”

His chest is fully bare to me now. He has an amazing body, just as I imagined he would. Hard muscle, toned. His skin is the only soft thing about him. I lean over and kiss his chest, run my finger through the small patch of hair I’d been admiring earlier. I make my way up to his neck where I lick him. He tastes as good as he smells. When I’m done nibbling his neck, I taste his chin and lay soft kisses against his jaw line.

And just as I'm about to kiss his lips, he suddenly pulls away, holding his bound hands in front of him as a barrier.

I'm so confused. I thought he was into it. "Did I do something wrong?" I ask.

"No, not at all," he says. "It's just ... you don't have to do that. It's not part of the deal."

"I know. I thought we already figured this out."

"I want you to know that's not required," he says.

I get it. He's in a male dominated business and as the owner of a multi-billion-dollar company he has to be careful, but this is different. There's no HR team for me to run to if I don't like the conditions of our arrangement. Then I start to wonder if maybe he's just not into me.

"Do you not want me to touch you?" I ask.

His eyes widen. "Of course I do." He moves his hands and I see the evidence of his lust filling the front of his pants nicely. "It's just not appropriate for our business arrangement."

"Wouldn't it be more believable though, if we were intimate?" My voice comes out as a whine. I'm practically begging. I want him so bad I'll make any excuse to make it happen. I think he knows it too because he lets out a breath of laughter.

"Maybe another time. I need to get back to work."

I let out a disappointed breath, but I'm not going to pressure him.

He looks at my breasts as I untie his wrists and put my shirt back on. I know this is as hard for him as it is for me, but he clearly has far more will-power than I do.

I go to my wing of the condo. It's huge. The same size as Heath's, but not as lived in. The bed is bigger than the room in the apartment I share with Mandi. A girl could get used all this space ... though, it's a bit lonely.

As I look around, I think about kissing Heath's chest and neck, the way he looked at me without my shirt on. I still can't believe I did that. This isn't real, whatever this is between Heath and me, but for a brief moment, it felt like it was and I wanted it. I guess I still do. I can't stop thinking about him and I want him. He's so handsome and sexy. Any girl in my position would. But that's not what he wants from me. He's looking for a fake bride to get through this time with his parents and I have to hold back these strange and unexpected feelings.

I need a few things from my apartment, so I take several trips back and forth to get them. It's also an excuse to drive my amazing temporary car. I know I can't keep it, so I'm going to enjoy it as much as I can while I have it.

On the last trip to my apartment, Mandi comes home and I'm so relieved to finally see her.

"How did things go?" she asks.

"Kind of amazing. He's nothing like I thought he'd be. He's really nice and sweet."

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Mandi sighs. “I was afraid this was going to happen.”

“What?”

“You’re falling for him.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes you are. I see it in your face and I can hear it in your voice. You can’t get involved with these guys, Sylph. They are clients, not people.”

“They are people,” I say.

“But not our people,” she says in the same lecturing tone I just used on her. “These men would never date anyone who doesn’t come from a family with money, or who isn’t on their level.”

My face must give away how crestfallen I feel because she gives me a sympathetic look and says, “I know. It sucks. I once had a client who I thought was into me. He took me on lavish vacations, wined and dined me. We even had sex on several occasions. I thought we had something special. But it turned out he was just trying to make his ex jealous. It worked. As soon as she was back in his life, he gave me the boot. I knew better, but I let myself fall for him anyway. It was heart-breaking. That’s why you can’t feel things, Sylph. You have such a big heart, which is why you have to protect it.”

“I know. You’re right,” I say. And I know she’s right, but it doesn’t make me feel any

better. “I’m not falling in love or anything. I’m just enjoying my time with him.”

“Good.” She looks at my suitcases. “What’s all this?”

“I’m staying with him while his family is in town.”

“That’s normal. But like I said, sleeping with him isn’t part of the deal, so don’t feel obligated to do anything you don’t want to do.”

There’s nothing I don’t want to do with Heath, but there’s plenty I want to do with him—and to him. Problem is, he isn’t budging. “That won’t be a problem.”

Heath calls to let me know he’ll be back at the condo by eight in the evening and wants to go over a few things with me before I meet his parents tomorrow. While I wait, I decide to run to the grocery store to pick up a few things since his refrigerator is bare.

I stop at a roadside stand for fresh fruit and vegetables. I pick a few things up there and stop at the store for everything else I’ll need for tonight. I love to cook. My mom taught me from the time I could walk. Since I grew up on a farm, we never ate out, so learning to cook was essential.

I decide to make peppercorn steak with glazed carrots and a salad. Rooting through his cupboards, it’s obvious none of his pots and pans have ever been used. Some of them even have price tags and stickers attached. Now’s a good time as any to break them in. I learn my way around his kitchen. Since it’s clear he never uses it, I take the liberty of switching things around so the arrangement makes more sense.

I finish making dinner just as Heath walks through the door. He stops in the walkway and looks at the table that’s set.

“Hope you’re hungry,” I say.

He’s still looking confused when he hangs up his jacket and walks over to the table, studying the dishes I’ve set out. “I am, actually. I was about to ask you if you wanted me to call in something, but I see you’ve already done it. Who brought this? It smells amazing.”

Now it’s my turn to be confused. “No one brought it. I made it.”

“You made this?” he says.

I giggle at the way he says this, as though it was some great feat of engineering. “Yes, I did. Sit before it gets cold.”

He does as he’s told. I watch his face as he takes a bite, afraid he won’t like it. It’s just down-home country food. Nothing fancy. He’s probably used to eating in five star restaurants similar to the one in the file where we had our second pretend date. When his next bite is so big it barely fits in his mouth, I know he likes it.

“This is extraordinary,” he says with his mouth full. “Did you go to culinary school?” he asks, taking another heaping bite.

“No, just picked up a few tips and tricks from my mom. She’s a far better cook than I am.”

“I can’t imagine that.”

He cleans his plate and fills it again with seconds. I forgot how much I love cooking for someone. Mandi never eats my cooking because she’s always on some new diet. My ex always enjoyed my cooking, but he never appreciated it. Cooking was always just expected. It was required. Dinner on the table at 6PM sharp, or else ...

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“I can’t eat another bite,” Heath says, then takes another bite.

I laugh. He’s so adorable. It makes me happy to watch him eat. It’s good to be appreciated once in a while.

I get up and start to clear the table. “No, don’t. I’ll take care of it,” he says.

“You’ve been working all day, grab a beer and go relax,” I tell him.

“There’s beer?”

“In the fridge. I didn’t know what you like, or if you even like beer, so I just bought something from the local brewery.” I shake my head. He’s probably more of a wine kind of guy. That didn’t even cross my mind.

“I like beer,” he says and opens the fridge. He pauses at the door. “It’s full,” he says in surprise.

“You needed a few things.”

“This is more than a few things.”

“You needed a lot of things, actually.”

He grabs a beer and follows me into the kitchen as I grab our dirty plates. I fill the sink with soap. He sets his beer on the counter and grabs the plate from me once I’ve washed it. He dries it with a towel and puts it in the cupboard.

We fall into easy conversation while we work. It's surprising that, even though we have nothing in common, we have so much to say to each other. There's never a lull in the conversation or uncomfortable silence. He tells me all about his family, and we go over the plan again and again. Then I ask him about his day. He tells me about his meetings and the insufferable building inspectors. He asks about my day, which surprises me a little. A lot of things surprise me about Heath, I guess. My ex never asked about my day. He never helped me with the dishes. He never told me I was talented in the kitchen. He just ate my food and burped, then plopped down on the couch and watched whatever game was on at the time. Turns out my fake relationship might be the best one I've ever been in.

Once the dishes are done, he says, "I'm exhausted. I'm going to turn in for the night."

We say our goodnights, and go our separate ways. I try reading, and when that fails to put me to sleep, I think about Heath and I masturbate. Luckily I remembered to bring my dildo. A very important accessory to have when you're sharing a house with a sexy man you can't touch. Getting myself off usually relaxes me enough to put me to sleep, but knowing that Heath is just down the long hallway makes thinking about him a poor substitute. I'm tempted to walk in his room naked and have my way with him, but I couldn't handle the rejection if he's not into it.

Hours pass and there's no way I'm getting any sleep, so I decide to get up and get some ice cream and watch TV for a while.

I'm in the kitchen when the door to Heath's room opens. I didn't think he'd be up so I didn't bother putting on a robe. My t-shirt is just barely long enough to cover my ass cheeks.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?" I say.

He's wearing only a pair of flannel pajama bottoms, and damn, he wears them well. I



can't get enough of his bare chest, the way his muscles look as though they've been carved out of hard wood. The guy is sculpted, and those arms ...

There is nothing sexier than a guy with nice arms. I picture them wrapped around me, pulling me toward him, crushing our bodies together. I realize I'm staring at him, so I look down at the tub of ice cream in my hands.

"No, I couldn't sleep," he says. He's staring at me too, at my bare legs.

"Me neither. I have a hard time sleeping in strange places. What's your excuse?"

I grab a second spoon out of the drawer and hand it to him. He takes a spoon full of the chocolate caramel swirl.

"My family. I'm always tense when they're in town. They can be overwhelming."

He puts the spoon in his mouth, rolls his shoulders and winces. I can literally see the muscle in his shoulders taut with tension.

"Sit," I tell him. "I have something that's guaranteed to help you sleep."

He looks skeptical but says, "Okay."

I go to my room where I find my toiletry supplies that I brought from my apartment. Inside are some massage oils I was given as a pampering gift from Mandi for my birthday last year. Cinnamon, my favorite scent. It's also good for sore muscles. I take the oils and head back to the kitchen where Heath is still digging into the ice cream container.

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He looks at the oils in my hands, then up at me. I can see the muscles in his shoulders tense up even more.

“Relax,” I say, and put several drops into my hands and rub them together to warm them up. I stand behind him and start to knead his shoulders with my thumbs.

He lets out a quiet moan, then says, “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

I work over his shoulders, up the sides of his neck and down his back until he starts to turn to putty in my hands.

“This would be easier if you were lying down,” I say. “Let’s go on the couch.”

“My bed is probably better, it’s more comfortable than that couch. The thing is built for looks, not comfort.”

I pause. His bed? I think he realizes just how it sounds and quickly says, “But I’m sure the couch will be fine.”

“No, let’s go to your bed,” I say.

I follow him to his room. It’s nothing special. Everything is plain, gray, boring. It needs a woman’s touch. He definitely has the bachelor vibe going on.

“Lay on your stomach,” I tell him.

He does and I climb on the bed, kneeling beside him. It's not a very comfortable position to be in, and it's hard for me to really dig into the muscles of his shoulders, so I straddle his butt instead. His back tenses up when I do that.

"Relax your muscles," I whisper to him.

Finally, after kneading his shoulders some more, he starts to relax. Eventually his entire body loosens up. His skin feels delectable under my fingertips, especially at the small of his back. His ass looks nice and firm, I'd like to massage it too, but I don't dare. I wonder if he can tell how hot I am between my legs, and wet. I'm sure when I get up there will be a wet spot on the back of his pajama bottoms where I'd soaked through my panties.

"Can you take these off so I can rub the backs of your legs too?" I ask, pulling at the waistband of his pajama bottoms.

"Um, I could, but I'm not wearing anything underneath."

"I'll grab a towel," I say and go into the bathroom attached to his room and get a towel.

When I get back his pajama bottoms are off. He's holding them in front of him, and he's looking at the wet spot I left on the back. His eyes meet mine and I know he knows what caused it.

I pretend not to see it and hand him the towel. His Adam's apple dips in his throat as he covers himself with the towel and drops his bottoms to the floor.

"Lay back down," I tell him.

He does, and I start to work on his long legs, moving my hands from the base of his

butt down to his feet where I spend a lot of my time. Even his feet are beautiful. Does this man have a single flaw?

I'm so turned on now that it feels like I wet myself. I should probably stop before I do something, or touch him somewhere that will change everything. "You can get up now."

"I can't, actually," he says.

"Why not?"

Did I rub too hard? Did I hurt him?

"I have a bit of an embarrassing situation happening beneath this towel."

I smile. He should see the embarrassing situation happening on the front of my panties. "I hate to break it to you, but I've seen your situation before, after we kissed in the park, and trust me, you have nothing to be embarrassed about."

He rolls over onto his back and manages to keep himself hidden by the towel. Sure enough, there is a situation. A very large situation. Without the cage of his suit pants to contain him, I see that he's much bigger than I originally thought, and I can't tear my eyes away from the mound hidden by that damn towel. I want to throw it off and expose him.

"You know my face is up here, right?" he says in a teasing voice.

My face is as hot as a kiln. I can only imagine the unflattering shade of crimson it must be.

"I'm sorry, it's just been a while since, you know ... and your skin, my hands, that

chest ...” I’m just spitting out random words, hoping they come together to make sense.

The way he’s looking at me is not helping matters. He’s looking at me the same way I feel myself looking at him, and we’re both turned on and there’s nothing but that pesky towel, my panties, and a moral dilemma to stop us.

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He touches the side of my bare leg, sending goosebumps all over my body. I'm not wearing a bra, so when my nipples harden, it's painfully obvious.

"You're beautiful," he whispers to me.

"So are you," I whisper back.

Then I reach out and I touch his chest. He sucks air through his teeth. Touching his chest is not enough for me. I don't want to just touch him. He looks delicious. I want to taste him too. When I reach for the towel, he grabs my wrist to stop me.

"We can't—"

"We can," I insist. "I want to."

His breathing gets heavier and he lets go of my wrist. I tug at the towel and let it fall. His cock might very well be the most stunning one I've ever seen. So many women I know think that a man's dick is ugly, but not me. And Heath's is especially tantalizing. It's big and lovely, the head glistening. It's a fucking masterpiece. I touch the length at first, gliding my hand along the velvet skin. He makes a dreamy groan as I wrap my hand around him. Then I kneel down and lean forward and take him in my mouth. He tastes as amazing as he looks and fills my mouth nicely. I slowly work his length down my throat and listen to the sexy noises he makes as he enjoys my efforts.

He runs his hands through my hair, taking a fistful as I miraculously swallow the entire length of him. I work his balls with my finger tips and he starts making a

desperate sound.

“That feels so fucking good,” he says.

I come up for air and lick him from the tip of the head, along the swollen vein on the underside, down to his balls. I take one in my mouth, swirl it around with my tongue and do the same to the other.

“That’s one hell of a mouth you have,” he says with a crooked grin.

“You like that?”

“I love it,” he says, his voice thick with lust.

“I want you to fuck my face,” I tell him.

I love to give a soft, sensual blow job, but right now I want to make him dizzy with want. I want him never to be able to resist me again.

“Are you sure?” he says timidly, but I can tell he wants it.

“I can take it,” I insist.

I make my way back up his cock with my tongue, lick the drop of pre-cum from the tip and swallow him back down. Heath cusses and lifts his hips upward to thrust inside my mouth on my way down.

I love having this kind of control over him. The way he begs and pleads for me not to stop. I feel a sense of pride knowing how much pleasure he’s in right now and it’s all because of me. I watch his face as I suck him off, the rawness of his expression, the lust, the restraint.

His breath starts to come in rapid fire, the sounds he's making are more animalistic. He holds the sides of my face and pumps into me as though it were my pussy.

He stops suddenly and says, "Wait, wait."

But there's no waiting. I want him, I want him all. I start bobbing on him, pushing his hands away so I can do all the work. I'm the one in charge now.

"Oh, god, oh fuck," he chants.

Finally, with an almost pained sound, he lets go and I clutch his hips as he bucks into me. I swallow every drop, and with my tongue, I lick up everything that escaped the corners of my lips from his explosion.

"There, does that feel better?" I say with a twisted, satisfied smile when I release him from the clutches of my mouth.

"Much better," he says, his voice husky and exhausted.

"Get some sleep," I say. "We have a big day tomorrow."

"But, don't you want me to—"

"There's plenty of time for that," I say, and go back to my room where I masturbate yet again.

6

Heath

The next morning, before I leave, I check on Sylph. I knock lightly on her door but



she doesn't answer. Hoping what happened last night between us didn't freak her out and send her running, I check the door handle. It's not locked. I go inside. Her suitcases are on the couch, open, stuff spilling out. Then I check her room. She's lying on her side on the bed, her long hair draped over her pillow, sound asleep. Next to her, on the night stand, is a formidable pink dildo.

I cover my smile with my hand. I'm pretty sure I wasn't supposed to see that, so I sneak out of the apartment without waking her up. I guess she was as turned on as I was by what transpired between us last night. I hadn't meant to let it get that far, but I have to admit, I'm not sorry about it. I haven't been that turned on in a long time. She has an award winning mouth. That girl knows how to suck a dick. I'm getting hard just thinking about it. After seeing that dildo on the nightstand and picturing her using it on herself, my flag is at full-mast.

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Now I can't get her out of my mind. I know what she did had nothing to do with money. She knows I'm not paying her for sexual favors. And then she made dinner for me. Those aren't the kinds of things women for hire do without a cash motivation.

Is it naïve to think there might actually be something between us? It's not like being a bride for hire is her typical job. There aren't other men out there who've shared this same experience with her.

I don't know. I don't want to get my hopes up, so I try not to think about it.

I direct my driver to a restaurant downtown. Instead of letting the wolves get to Sylph right away, I decide to have breakfast with my family first and make sure they're on their best behavior.

They are already at the restaurant when I arrive, which shocks the hell out of everyone, including myself since I'm usually always the first one to arrive anywhere we go. My time with Sylph last night has thrown off everything. I find myself thinking about her instead of paying attention to the time. One look at my dad's face and it's obvious he's annoyed by my tardiness. My mom doesn't care. She doesn't care about much outside of all of her fundraisers and luncheons. She's waiting for me with open arms. From the looks of things, she's had one too many mimosas already. The twins, Theo and Arora, two years younger than me, wear the same disbelieving expressions on their faces.

"Is this the part where you tell us this whole engagement is a joke and we can go home?" Theo says. He wears a seersucker coat, shorts that hit just above his knee, and boat shoes. A trendy look for the young and wealthy these days, but to me he

looks like a tool.

“Where is the girl who stole my darling big brother’s heart?” Arora says. Her saccharine smile does little to hide her contempt.

“She’s busy making wedding preparations. I wanted to see you first and tell you a little bit about her before you meet.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Arora asks.

“Nothing,” I say. “She’s just different. She’s down to earth, and genuinely kind. Absolutely beautiful. Her laugh alone will set anyone at ease. I care about her a lot, so I want you two to be nice to her.” I can hear the change in my voice when I talk about her. The truth behind my words is impossible to hide, which seems to confuse the twins.

“We’re always on our best behavior,” Theo says with a slight tilt of his lips that usually means the opposite of what he’s saying.

“Well she sounds lovely, dear,” my mother says. “And I, for one, can’t wait to meet her.”

The rest of the meal is filled with the twin’s idol chitchat, and on the outside everyone seems to be fine with the engagement. Maybe my parents are, but I know the twins better than that.

During the ride home I find myself excited to see Sylph again. I try to tell myself not to be. This isn’t a permanent situation. It’s best not to get attached. But the moment I walk through the door and see her sitting on the couch with a book in her hands, there’s a twist of longing in my chest. Longing to kiss her, to hold her, to be with her in any capacity. I just want to be near her. That thought messes with my mind, and so

I try to turn my face into an emotionless mask so she doesn't see it.

Her face lights up when she sees me and it's difficult not to smile, but I manage.

"Hey, you. You're up early," she says.

"I went out to breakfast with my family. I wanted to make sure they were on their best behavior when they meet you."

"You're really sweet to care about my feelings that way."

I open my mouth to say, I would never let anyone hurt you, but decide to hold my tongue. I hate the confusion I feel right now. This was supposed to be easy. That's the whole point in hiring someone to marry me—no attachments, no feelings, and yet I'm breaking all the rules. How did this happen?

"Sylph, about last night ... we should probably talk about it."

"Are you sure you want to talk about it? Wouldn't you rather have a reenactment?"

She gives me a devilish little smile that makes the traitor in my pants perk up. I was going to tell her that it can't happen again, but now the words just won't come to me. Instead I find myself smiling like an idiot. I lean in to kiss her just as there's a knock at the door.

7

Sylph

I straighten up, try to adjust my clothes. Damnit. Heath was just about to kiss me. I haven't been able to stop thinking about him since what happened between us last night. Actually, if I'm being honest with myself, I haven't been able to stop thinking about him since our first kiss on our pretend first date. Heath Starre has completely taken me by surprise.

Heath opens the door and standing behind it is one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen in my life. She's young, early to mid-twenties, long auburn hair, long limbs. She's wearing a body contouring dress that fits just right. When she smiles it's with full lips and straight white teeth. This is the kind of girl I imagine Heath would've dated before he started fake-dating me. Jealousy roars through my veins, and I hate myself for it. I have to keep reminding myself that this isn't real with him and it's going to end the moment he no longer needs my services.

"Hi," the woman says cheerily.

Heath rolls his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"You weren't really going to make me wait until dinner to meet my future sister-in-law, were you?" she says.

Sister-in-law? She must be one of the twins. Relief washes over me.

Reluctantly, Heath steps aside and lets her in. He glances at me with a look full of apologies. “Sylph, meet my sister. This Arora.”

She wears a smile, but there is something very unpleasant about the way she’s studying me. This must be what it feels like to be a hen stalked by a fox.

“Sylph, it’s so nice to meet you.”

I stand up and give her a hug. In the folder Heath gave me about his family, I’ve learned that Arora doesn’t hug. She’s not a physically affectionate person. She’s more a giver of gifts. Which is exactly why I hug her: to throw her off her game the way she has thrown me off of mine by showing up out of the blue.

It seems to work because when I step back she looks bewildered and ready to flee the scene.

“Um,” she says and looks at Heath. He shrugs and smiles at me because he knows what I’m doing and seems amused by it.

Arora is quick to recover and plasters the fake smile back on her face. “I was hoping to take you dress shopping. You haven’t found your wedding gown yet, have you?”

“Not yet, but I can’t go without my best friend. She’s my maid of honor,” I say.

Though I haven’t yet asked Mandi to be the maid of honor, it seems a given, fake relationship or not.

“Text her,” Arora says.

“Right now?”

“Of course, silly. You have to get your dress as soon as possible before all the good ones have been taken.”

I look at Heath for help. He shrugs like he doesn't know what to do either.

So I furiously text Mandi in the hopes she'll come with us and defuse this bomb. I tell her that I'm about to go dress shopping with Heath's sister who may or may not be Satan herself. Mandi texts back that she wishes she could but is busy with work.

What the hell? She got me into this mess. She was supposed to be here for me when I needed her, but it seems like she's been avoiding me.

I take a deep breath and steel myself. “She can't make it. Looks like we're on our own.”

Arora gives me a predatory grin and says, “Perfect. I have a car waiting for us downstairs.”

I try on all the dresses that Arora picks out for me. They are all beautiful, but none of them feel right. This isn't your typical dress shop where you can find something affordable yet still beautiful. This is a place where royalty would shop if they were getting married. Everything is custom made, one-of a kind, couture. They serve champagne and cater to our every desire. I'm thankful for the alcohol. It settles my nerves a little. Very little.

Arora asks me a lot of questions. It's starting to feel more like an interrogation than a dress fitting. I'm careful to keep to the story that was laid out for me by Heath. I don't think she's buying any of it.

I try on the last dress in the stack. It's beautiful. All of them are. But this one is especially beautiful. Hand beaded, high neck with lace, but short capped sleeves.

Very modern, like nothing I've ever seen before, which must be why the price tag is so steep. And though I love the way it looks, and it fits me like a glove, it still doesn't feel right. I'm not sure if anything will.



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“How did you two meet?” Arora asks as the lady helping us shows me tiaras and veils.

I tell her about walking the dogs in the park, how they got off leash and how Heath saved the day. My mind starts to wander back to that day when Heath ate from the hotdog cart after refusing to at first, and how he loved it so much he finished mine. He was so stiff and awkward at first, and I wasn’t sure I was going to like him when we first met, but then, seemingly out of nowhere, he charmed me. Then there was that kiss ... It was the kind of kiss girls dream of.

As I’m telling the story, I realize I’m smiling, and I hear the whimsy in my voice. When I finish telling Arora about how Heath and I met, her eyebrows are raised. Is that surprise I see, and maybe a bit of amusement?

“A literal blushing bride,” she says. I look down at my chest and see that I’m flushed. Heath does that to me. Apparently, so does the thought of him. “That’s some story. It’s very romantic.”

“It was,” I say, and it’s not a lie.

“Sounds nothing like my brother. He’s normally such a stiff.”

I don’t know why, but her comment puts me on edge and I feel the need to defend Heath.

“Maybe you don’t know him as well as you think you do.”

His whole family lives out of the country, and from the sound of it, they don't come to visit that often. How would she know how he acts with someone he cares about?

She has a slight grin on her face and I think she purposefully tried to rattle me. It worked. At this point I don't care about the dress anymore. I just want to get out of here.

"This dress is fine," I say.

Arora tells the woman helping us that we'll take it. I don't even feel bad that it cost more than I earned in the last two years combined.

Heath is gone when I get back to the apartment. I go into my room where there's a tall mirror. I want to see the dress without Arora there judging me and being suspicious. Even though the dress is for a fake wedding, I want to feel right wearing it. I get it on, but there are so many different buttons and hooks in the back that I can't do it myself. Still, just holding it up against me, looking in the mirror, it feels all wrong.

I close my eyes and sigh, frustrated. When I open my eyes again, I see Heath's reflection in the mirror. It gives me a start. He looks equally as stunned. He's staring at the dress. I look back at my own reflection, trying to see what he sees. The only thing that feels right about this whole thing is Heath. That's when I realize that my feelings for him have tipped past the point of no return. For me this has become more than a working relationship and it's all my fault. I shouldn't have kissed him, or started giving him a massage. I shouldn't have put my mouth on him last night.

I shouldn't have done any of those things, but I can bring myself to regret it. I now know why the dress doesn't feel right. It's because I don't want it to be a dress for a fake marriage with Heath. I want what he and I have to be real.

But it's not real and it can't be. I'm here for a job. Heath doesn't want me. Mandi's words swirl around in my head about how I'm not good enough. I'll never be the kind of girl a guy like him goes for. I don't have the wealth or the status. I'm bad for the image he seems to care so much about.

"You look incredible," he says.

I feel the pressure of tears behind my eyes. I can't cry in front of him.

"I have to go," I say, but when I try to leave, my feet get tangled up in the train and I fall to my knees. I'm not hurt, but I stay there anyway, fighting tears and this new emotional sandbag I've brought on myself.

Heath comes to me and kneels by my side. "Are you hurt?"

I shake my head. "No."

"What's wrong?" he asks when I cover my face.

"I hate this dress."

"Why? You look beautiful. You're the prettiest bride I've ever seen."

His words aren't helping. They make me want to cry even more. I laugh to keep from crying. "This is all so stupid," I say under my breath. I don't think he heard my words. If he did, he doesn't ask what I mean by it.

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I reach back behind me to try to undo the buttons. This dress wasn't as hard to put on as it is to take off. Once I undo the buttons, I realize the zipper is stuck. Jesus Christ, is this a dress or a straightjacket? It's starting to feel like both.

"Let me help you," Heath says, and wiggles the zipper until it comes loose. He unzips it and pulls the dress off my shoulders.

He then helps me to stand up. When I do, the dress slips down and pools at my feet. I'm not wearing a bra, or anything else except a pair of thong underwear.

His gaze starts at my feet and slowly—very slowly—takes in every line, every curve of my body until our eyes meet. He looks at me with unfiltered lust. He doesn't even try to hide the fact that he's hard and I do nothing to hide my nakedness from him.

Taking a step forward, he takes my shoulders and turns me away from the mirror to face him. His eyes are bright with want and something more than just lust, maybe. Or maybe I just want him to feel the same way that I do so I'm imagining things.

He caresses my shoulders and moves his hands down my arms. It tickles and feels amazing at the same time. Then he kisses me. Not a sweet, teasing kiss. It's the kind that demands all of my attention, and lets me know he's not messing around. This kiss speaks more than words ever could and makes promises about what's to come.

His lips move down to my neck. I tilt my head back, giving him as much room as he needs. His tongue is so soft and warm. I start to imagine what it would feel like on other parts of my body. That thought sends a shiver through me.

“Are you cold?” he says.

I shake my head. “The opposite.” I pull my fingers through his hair. “I’m so hot right now. I want you.”

His lips crash against mine and our mouths tangle in a passionate kiss. His hands wander to my breasts where he cups them and pinches my nipples between his fingertips. The sensation flares through my nerve endings until I feel every part of me lighting up. I moan and deepen our kiss. When we part, he wastes no time locking his lips onto one of my breasts while his hand discovers the other one. He suckles and bites, giving both pleasure with tinges of pain, just enough to make things interesting and keep my body at attention.

His hands explore every part of me meticulously as if he were trying to memorize me by touch. He parts with my breast just long enough for him to take off his shirt. I don’t get the chance to admire his cut chest before he latches back on, but this time on the other breast that hasn’t received its fair amount of attention.

My pussy aches for him. I don’t know how much longer I can bear to not have him inside of me. But then again, what he’s doing to my breasts is fucking brilliant, and I don’t want him to stop doing that either.

I help him out of his pants and boxers and slip off my panties. Now we’re both naked and on the same playing field. He pulls in a sharp breath when I grip him. Then I slowly begin to stroke.

“I want you inside of me,” I beg.

He pulls his mouth away from me. When our eyes meet, there’s no longer any hesitation there. “Not yet.”

“But—”

“Get your dildo,” he says.

I look at him, shocked. “How do you know about my dildo?”

His lips form a teasing smile. “I came in here to check on you this morning. You were asleep. I saw it on your dresser.”

I’m too turned on to be embarrassed. I walk over to the night stand, grab it out of the drawer and come back to him with it. The way he’s looking at me, I know I’m in for the ride of my life.

8

Heath

I rub her clit and finger her silky pussy, making sure she’s good and ready for the dildo I hold in my hands. Her juices run down my fingers, into my palm, and down my wrist. She lets out the sexiest moan I’ve ever heard.

“Bend over,” I say.

She starts to bend over.

“No, in front of the mirror.”

She stands in front of the mirror and watches me with sultry, hooded eyes. I take her by the hips and turn her so her ass is facing the mirror.

“On your knees,” I say.

She smiles and I can tell she likes where this is going. She kneels down and bends over until the side of her face is against the carpet.

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“Can you see yourself?” I ask. My cock pulses at the sight of her splayed and open to me. I love that she’s so confident and there’s not an ounce of self-consciousness while being exposed and vulnerable.

She moves her head so she can watch. “Yes,” she says, panting.

She looks fucking amazing at this angle, and by the way she’s moving her hips to get the best possible angle, I think she knows it. Her pussy is satin-pink, wet, and slightly gaping, her asshole a perfect little knot.

I spread her folds apart, which causes her to drip on the carpet and I nearly come at the sight of it. I don’t think I’ve ever been with a girl who’s gotten this wet before.

She moans. “Fuck me, please.” When I put the head of the dildo against her opening she begs for it. She gasps when I slowly push it inside of her. It’s halfway in when I finally meet some resistance. She moves her hips and it goes further in and her moans fill the room. I work it in and out of her, enjoying the show of filling her up.

I kneel behind her and suck on her clit while the dildo is inside of her and listen to her chant, “Oh, fuck, yes, yes, yes.”

“I want you inside of me,” she says.

I want to fuck her more than anything, but when we do, I don’t want it to be under the weight of this fake marriage.

“Not until the wedding night,” I tease.



“I thought you weren’t old fashioned.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Then I want you in my mouth,” she says.

She rises so she’s on her hand and knees. She grabs the dildo from me and starts working it inside of her with one hand while keeping her balance with the other. I stand in front of her. She opens her mouth and I slip the head of my cock between her full wet lips. I smooth the hair away from her eyes. She looks up at me, watching my face as she gives me head. She does this thing with her tongue where she swirls it around the head and the sensitive under side that makes it nearly impossible to keep from blowing my load. It takes a small miracle to hold it in. I’m not coming until she gets hers.

I force myself to keep my eyes open to see the show, but my body just wants to give into this amazing sensation.

If this were real. If we were real, this could be our life. I could be fucking the most beautiful, fun, amazing girl I’ve ever met on a regular basis. She would be mine.

The sounds of her moans change, becoming desperate. She works the dildo faster, her hand a blur in the mirror as she fucks herself. I know she’s close. So am I. She’s an expert at this, and I still can’t believe I’ve lasted this long.

One more thrust into her mouth and I explode.

Her whole body starts to shake, and I watch, enraptured as she’s racked by orgasm contractions. The dildo slips out, covered in her cum, her pussy raw from friction. She turns over and lays on her back. I lay next to her, utterly spent.

We're both out of breath, but quiet and content. It was incredible. It's been so long since I've been with a woman I've actually cared about, that I'd forgotten how amazing it could feel with the right person.

"You're incredible," I tell her.

She gives me a lust-drunk smile. "So are you."

I roll over onto my side and kiss her shoulder. I glance over at the dress piled on the floor in the corner. "Why do you hate the dress?" I ask.

She glances over at the white pile of lace and satin and cringes.

"I guess that's probably not how I should be treating a dress that cost a fortune, but right now I'm having a hard time convincing myself to care." She looks at me with those beautiful eyes and sex-flushed face. There's still beads of sweat dotting her forehead. She shrugs. "It felt wrong, picking it out, since this is all fake."

Even though I'm very aware that our arrangement isn't the real thing, it still burns to hear her say it. I try not to let it affect me, but it's impossible. The smile I'd had plastered to my face just moments ago slips away. Now I couldn't force a smile even if I wanted to.

"It's fine," she says quickly, and I know she sees the change in me. "I'll wear it and do the job."

I stare up at the ceiling. "If you'd like a different dress, feel free to get it. I've left my black card on the kitchen counter for all of your needs while you're here." I stand up and put my clothes on. I can't be here right now. "I have to get back to work."

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I leave without another glance.

9

Heath

Sitting at my desk, there's a pile of work in front of me that needs to get done, but I can't concentrate. Sylph's words haunt me: 'It felt wrong, picking out the dress, since this is all fake'. Maybe the marriage is fake but it isn't all fake. At least it's not for me.

But maybe it is for her. I keep asking myself, if this is just a job for her then why has she been intimate with me? The only answer I have come up with is because she must have feelings for me. But now I wonder if maybe she just enjoys sex. I can't fault her for that. I too enjoy sex. But with Sylph it's more than that. Now I'm starting to realize it may be one sided.

I shouldn't have walked out on her the way I did. She'll think I'm mad.

Sighing, I know there's nothing I can do about that now. There's only a few more hours until I have to go meet up with my family.

10

Sylph

Heath's family hates me. It's been several days since we met them for dinner and

they haven't made any effort to meet up with me or get to know me since. I guess I should be thankful for that because they are awful. Not his mom, and I guess not his dad, really, since he didn't really say much throughout the dinner, but the twins are the worst. I knew Arora was going to be a handful after dress shopping with her, but when she and Theo get together, they are a freaking tornado. The way they deliver underhanded insults is a true talent because while they're tearing you apart, it feels strangely like a compliment and I never really felt the digs until later when I laid in bed and thought about them.

Heath was mostly quiet through dinner with his family, only speaking up on occasion to tell the twins to back off. If he was wanting to sell the relationship between us, he was doing a poor job of it. He did nothing but brood the whole night, then, when we got home, he went straight to his room and didn't come out the rest of the night. I'd wanted to knock on his door to see if he wanted company, but had the distinct feeling his broodiness had something to do with me.

It's Friday evening and close to time to leave for the rehearsal. I go to Heath's room and knock on the door. We haven't really spoken since we had dinner with his parents—not in any real way. Not like we had been before that.

He opens the door, a towel wrapped around his waist, his hair wet from his shower. There's still a few specks of shaving cream on his chin and the sides of his face. He wipes them off with a hand towel as he stands there waiting to hear why I've knocked.

I take several deep breaths to calm my racing heart. Why am I so nervous right now?

"Hi," I say.

The corner of his mouth twitches into something like a smile. "Hi."

“Can we talk?”

“Of course.”

He steps aside, letting me into his room. I walk in. The air is humid. There's condensation on the mirrors. He must have taken a hot shower with the door open.

“What's up?” he asks.

He sits on the bed and pats the empty spot next to him. I sit.

“I shouldn't be nervous about today, right?” I ask.

This will be the first time since that awkward dinner that I will spend any real time with his family.

“Of course not. I'll be right there with you.”

I shake my head. “But you won't. You haven't been here with me since we fooled around in my room. I did something wrong. Or maybe I said something, but ever since then, you've changed. I just ... I want you back. The way you were with me. I don't think I can pull this off without you.”

I hadn't realized how tense he was in my presence until I see his shoulders relax. He reaches for me and puts his hand on my cheek, brushing his thumb across the line of my jaw. I feel myself melting into his touch.

“I promise, I'm here for you.”

“Then kiss me.”

He hesitates. It's only for a second but it's there. He leans over and gives me a soft peck on the lips. But I want more. I want to feel him all over me, inside of me. I want the comfort of his weight on top of me. I try to deepen the kiss, but he pulls away.

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Standing up, he says, “I should finish getting ready. We’ll have to leave soon.”

I suppress a groan and leave the room.

We get to the venue where the wedding will take place. It’s a hotel, but not like any hotel I’ve ever seen. It looks more like a castle. The wedding will happen on the back lawn which is stunning. The grass is perfectly manicured with an incredible view of the ocean. Surrounding the area where the guests will sit is a botanical garden. Everyone will be bathed in the floral scents of tea roses, gardenias, and canna lily. In the middle of the garden is a long staircase that makes a slight decline from the reception hall down to a circular path that wraps around a large cherub fountain.

With all the twinkling lights sprinkled over every shrub and sugar maple tree, it’s like a fairytale. If this were real, if it were truly my wedding, it would be a dream come true. But it’s not. Someday, when Heath finds the woman he wants to marry, this will be her reality.

I glance at him and find that he’s watching me. Looking at him, I feel a profound sadness and I’m on the verge of tears.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I shake my head and swallow the thickness in my throat. “Nothing. It’s just all so beautiful it’s overwhelming.

“You look sad,” he says.

I hate lying to him, but what am I supposed to say? That I'm falling in love with him and I wish all of this were real? He'd probably fire me on the spot. No, I can't tell him how I really feel. It would ruin everything.

So instead I tell him, "Not sad, just nervous." Which, the last part is true.

He looks almost disappointed, like he wanted me to admit I was sad.

Everyone starts to show up. I don't know who any of these people are. I wish Mandi were here so I would at least know one person. She's been avoiding me. I know she is, but I can't figure out why. I've even tried to ambush her in front of the apartment, but it's as if she can sense me and ends up not showing up.

People seem to be suspicious that I don't have any family in the wedding party or friends in the crowd. I don't really have any friends outside of Mandi, and there's no way I could tell my parents about my fake marriage. They wouldn't play along. They're always worried about me not having any money and they would see this job as me getting desperate. They would want me to come home. And while they would never come right out and call me a failure, I would feel like one. Before leaving home they begged me not to move away, but I insisted I could make it on my own. I want to prove that I can. Which is why I can't tell them anything about this fake wedding. I start to wonder if there's also a service that provides fake families along with fake brides. There should be. I'll have to pitch the idea to Mandi if I ever see her again.

Once everyone is in place, the rehearsal begins. It's strange walking down the aisle. Though I've been married before, the ceremony wasn't anything like this. My ex and I had gone to Reno and stayed in a circus-themed motel for two nights, which was considered our honeymoon. The chapel we were married in was called the Church-O-Love, and had a line going out the door with other couples waiting to make the worst decisions of their lives in front of an Elvis impersonating officiant. We even ordered the deluxe package which included a limo ride from the chapel to our motel. The limo



itself was a nineteen-seventy something Chrysler with cracked vinyl seats and some ominous mystery stains splattered across the velvet ceiling. Not sure who in their right mind would ever consider any of it romantic. My ex and I laughed the whole time. It was all a big, funny joke. Until it wasn't.

When reality finally settled in and I realized I was stuck with the man I'd married, the joke quickly turned into a nightmare.

I feel sick to my stomach as I walk down the aisle and people are watching me. This is the first time in my life I've ever felt like a complete fraud. I'm ready to run. I just want to get out of here. That is until I lock eyes with Heath. He smiles at me. More than encouraging, it feels genuine. I smile back and as long as I look at him, I know I can do this.

When I finally make it to him, he holds out his hand and I take it. The warmth and firmness of his grip calms my frayed nerves. While we're standing in front of each other, the officiant goes over the rest of the details with the wedding party and the planner, and Heath and I are left in our own little world under a flower-draped altar.

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The way Heath looks at me, it's like no one else is around and I feel perfectly at ease. Sometimes it's almost as if he's in love with me. My ex never looked at me the way Heath does. It's easy to see why things are so confusing with him. I want to say something about it, but would he even know what I'm talking about? I've never seen him look at anyone else the way he looks at me, but then again, it's not as if I've known him for years. Maybe he looks at other women that same way and I just haven't noticed—though I doubt it. I'm fairly certain if I saw that look on his face directed at anyone other than me, I'd rip the girl's throat out.

I smile a little at my jealous thoughts, glad that Heath isn't in my head to hear them.

Standing here with him under this altar, I can see myself married to him. Before I met Heath, I was certain being remarried was quite possibly the worst thing that could ever happen to me. Now that I see what life can be like with someone who is kind and good, I want it. I want it more than anything. But not with just anyone. I want it with Heath. No one else will do.

“You're the best man I've ever met,” I whisper to him.

He gives me a funny look. “You don't have to say the vows until the actual ceremony. I've written some down if you don't want to write your own.”

I huff out laughter. “Those aren't my vows. I just want you to know how I feel about you. I know this is just a job but I'm happy I met you. You're kind, and wonderful, and—”

Someone clears their throat beside me. Heath and I both turn to the source of the

noise. Heath looks annoyed that we were interrupted. The officiant, and everyone else in the wedding party, is looking at us.

“I think everyone knows their places,” the man says.

I blush even though I know no one else heard what I was saying. I was lost in the moment with Heath and didn’t hear a word anyone said. Hopefully I won’t mess anything up on the actual wedding day.

“Great,” Heath says, his mood completely changed from his somewhat quiet, brooding self this morning. Now he seems almost bubbly. “Let’s go to dinner.”

11

Heath

I didn’t know just how badly I wanted to hear those words from Sylph until she said them. Then I realized I’d been craving them since I started developing feelings for her. And the way she looked at me ...

I know she feels it too. Maybe not to the extent that I do, but it’s there.

At dinner we sit at our own table facing our guests. I slip my hand underneath the table to touch her knee. I glance over in time to see the corner of her mouth turn up into a smile. Then she spreads her legs. Oh, okay. She wants to play.

I slide my hand up an inch, thankful for the long table cloth surrounding us. I move up another inch and her legs spread wider. Eventually, with one hand, I manage to slip my fingers beneath her skirt and push her panties to the side. Her smooth skin feels delectable, and I’m tempted to crawl beneath the table to taste her.

I'm fingering her with the crowd in front of us. My friends and family are all here, witnessing this debauchery without even knowing it. There's something exhilarating about doing something so private in an open venue. It brings out the exhibitionist in me. Everyone is too busy talking amongst themselves to even notice that Sylph's breathing is rushed and she's biting her lip.

Her pussy is so wet my fingers glide right in and she feels like warm silk.

"Is this thing almost over?" she asks, her voice low and full of want.

"Not even close."

She lets out a frustrated growl. "I want you so bad," she says.

"You can have me."

"I mean now. I want you right now."

"You can have me right now," I say.

She gives me the side eye. "How?"

I let my hand slip out from between her legs and lick my fingers clean. She lets out a surprised little chuckle. Her scent is amazing and arousing and her taste is even better. I want more.

I stand and announce that my fiancée and I are going to take a quick tour of the venue. My family looks surprised by our sudden exit, especially since dessert has yet to be served, but I'm about to get the only treat I want.

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I take Sylph by the hand and lead her into the hall where there's a utility room. Inside is full of extra vases and flower arrangements, along with mops and buckets. I put a broom stick through the handle of the door so no one can get in and lead her to the corner and lay her down on a pile of extra table clothes.

I lean down, giving her a peck on the lips. "I want you inside of me," she says.

Sometimes, when I look at her, her beauty seems to come out of nowhere and strike me. She literally takes my breath away looking at her.

"I want to be inside of you too, but not here. Not like this. Right now, I just want to pleasure you."

I lift her skirt and pull her panties off, tossing them into the shadows. We won't be needing those any time soon.

She gasps. "Pleasuring is good too," she says.

I spread her legs wide, marveling, again, at how wet she gets. "You have a beautiful pussy," I tell her, the hunger evident in my voice.

She gives me a sexy little smile and starts rubbing her clit. "It's all yours."

I gently spread her pink folds with the tips of my fingers and start to explore her warm depths with my tongue. Her clit it hard. I pull back the hood shrouding it and begin to suck. She's moaning and bucking her hips, begging for more.

“Holy shit, right there,” she says.

I continue to suckle on her and decide to add a couple fingers to the mix. Her back arches, eyes rolling back, possessed by the orgasm building up. I can feel the muscles inside of her tighten around my fingers. She’s close. But I’m not ready for it to end yet, so I slow my thrusts and give her time to calm down. Once she goes back to the quiet little moans, I start to work her over again. This time I add the third finger and hook them toward her g-spot. It’s when I add a forth finger that she can’t hold on anymore. She lets out a burst of sound that rings in my ears and her orgasm clamps down so hard on my fingers I’m afraid my hand will get stuck.

She starts furiously rubbing at her swollen clit and hunches and bears down, racked by yet another orgasm. My dick strains against my jeans. Watching this sexy woman orgasm twice in a row with her scent in my nose and on my tongue is more than I can take. I bust my load without ever being touched. Shit. The wet spot on my pants is going to be difficult to hide from our guests. But it was worth it.

Once Sylph comes down from her orgasm, she’s practically glowing. She looks at me with a radiant smile. “Are you sure those are fingers and not magic wands?” she says.

I laugh and shake my head. “It doesn’t take much to get you there, does it?” I say.

I’ve had women tell me they’ve orgasmed before, and I never really believed it. With Sylph it was undeniable and entirely addicting. All I want in life is to make her come over and over again. In fact, I’m getting hard again just thinking about it.

“Not when it comes to you. You know how to turn me on,” she says.

“We’re definitely sexually compatible. Aren’t we?”

“More than compatible. It feels like our bodies were made for each other.”

As soon as she says it, she looks stunned, like she might've said something wrong. Then she quickly says, "Maybe we should get back."

She gets up and searches for her underwear. I want to tell her it's more than just our bodies that is made each other. We belong together. Body and soul.

I don't say that, though. Instead, I grumble and say, "If we have to. But I'm nowhere near done with you yet."

She bites her lip. "Not a chance."

We go back to the main room with our guests. I head to the bar for a drink while Sylph is cornered by one of my distant relatives who wants to know all about how she keeps herself looking so radiant. Sylph giggles because we both know the answer to that is sex. She gives me the nod to let me know she doesn't need rescuing and I continue on to the bar.

Before I can get there, I'm ambushed by my siblings. They both wear the same mischievous look on their faces and it's clear they're up to something.

"Now what?" I say, losing my patience for them. They are always finding new ways to get on my nerves. I'm starting to wonder if it's a game they play.

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“We’ve been doing a little research on your fiancée,” Theo says.

My heart plummets. I knew they would be intrusive, but I didn’t know they’d go as far as to dig up dirt on Sylph. I’m fairly confident anything they’ve come up with I already found in my own research, so I won’t be too caught off guard. But there’s always a chance I missed something.

“Turns out your girlfriend’s best friend deals in brides for hire,” he says.

“How do you know who Sylph’s best friend is?”

“I saw the number she was texting while we were dress shopping and looked up the name,” Arora says with a superior grin.

These two are sneaky. I didn’t realize the lengths they would go to. I shouldn’t have underestimated them.

“Yes, Sylph has told me all about Mandi’s business. Seems lucrative. A bit insane if you ask me, but to each their own,” I say, shrugging it off.

I’m not at all taken aback by their revelation. I prepared myself for that information to get out. But just because her friend deals in brides for hire, doesn’t make Sylph an employee. I would’ve been more concerned about it had I not found out this is Sylph’s first job—and last if I have anything to do with it.

The twins look disappointed that this doesn’t shock me, or that I don’t come right out and confess that our relationship is a fake. But they don’t look ready to give up so



easily.

Arora has a piece of paper in her hand and waves it in front of her face as if it were a fan. “Did you know she was married before?” she says with a smug look.

My breath catches in my throat and I hold it. Now this is definitely a surprise. How did this not show up in my own research? That’s a big thing to miss.

Arora and Theo look at each other and smile. Clearly, I’m shocked by this news. It’s impossible to hide the confusion on my face. But somehow I manage to regain my composure.

“No, I didn’t know that. But I do know Sylph and if she didn’t tell me about it, maybe there’s a good reason for it.”

Sylph walks up to us right then. She looks concerned when seeing my face. “Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Does it look like everything is okay?” Arora snaps at her.

Sylph loses the sweet façade she’s been putting on for my family and glares at my sister. “What the hell is going on?”

“Maybe we should be the ones asking you that. It seems you’re the one keeping secrets after all,” Arora says.

Sylph’s expression shifts from irritated to worry. She looks at me like she’s not sure what to say. I wonder if she’s trying to figure out which lie they’ve uncovered. How many other things is she keeping from me? I don’t want to be suspicious, but I’m hurt that she would keep something like this from me.

“I don’t think you really know your future wife at all,” Theo says. “I think you bought a fake bride to get everyone off your back and now you’re about to let Mom and Dad spend a fortune on this sham of a marriage.”

I take Sylph by the hand and give it a gentle squeeze, and say, “I don’t really care what the two of you think.”

“Maybe not, but once our parents find out about all of this, I’m sure you’ll care what they think.”

I ball my empty hand into a fist and fight the urge to hit my little brother.

Arora turns her vicious stare on Sylph and says, “You’re a great actress. When you were blushing and talking about how great Heath was, I really thought you meant it. But really you’re just a gold digger like all the other dumb bitches he’s dated.”

Sylph takes an aggressive step forward and Arora backs away. My sister is used to fighting with poisoned words, but Sylph wasn’t born with a silver spoon in her mouth. I imagine she fights much differently. She looks like she might actually hit Arora. I wouldn’t try to stop her if she did.

Sylph doesn’t hit her, though. Instead she gets right up in her face and says, “Hand me a pre-nup. I’ll sign it right now.”

“Bull shit,” Arora says. Theo looks disbelieving as well.

“I have a pen right here.” She digs into her purse and pulls one out. “Just point to the arrows and I’ll sign.”

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“You’re lying,” Arora says.

“I’m not. I love Heath. He’s the most amazing man I’ve ever met and I’m not going to let you poison his mind against me.”

I watch Sylph’s face. Does she mean that? Does she actually love me, or is this part of the lie?

Arora tries to keep up with her high-and-mighty act, but Sylph’s close proximity and aggressive nature has taken her off-kilter. Even Theo seems to know to stay back.

“You’ll poison him yourself. I just have to sit back and watch it all fall apart.”

I’ve had enough. I need to talk to Sylph and figure out what the hell is going on.

“I want both of you to leave,” I say.

Arora looks like I just slapped her. “You’re kicking us out after she’s the one who lied?”

“It looks that way, doesn’t it?”

Arora’s lips pinch together before she huffs out an irritated harrumph and stomps away.

Sylph

“We need to talk,” Heath says and drags me back to the closet where we’d just fooled around.

I’m too nervous to say anything. I wonder what they found out about me and how bad it is for his situation. I wait for him to speak. At first it seems like he’s too mad to get the words out. I start to tremble.

Finally, he asks, “Were you married before?”

Oh no.

I don’t want to tell him my horrible secret, but I won’t lie to him either. It’s taken me years to get over how awful my marriage was. It’s still hard for me to trust or open myself up to someone. Before I met Heath I was sure I would never find anyone I would want to be with. But he’s changed me for the better. He’s changed my life completely. I owe him the truth.

“Yes, when I was eighteen. It only lasted a year,” I say.

“Why? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t think it was important information with this job. And I left him because he used to hit me. It’s a part of my past I’d rather forget.”

A muscle in his jaw flexes. “He hit you?”

I nod and a tear slips down my cheek. Half the reason I don’t like to bring it up is because whenever I even come close to talking about it, I always cry. I felt so stupid for the longest time because I let something like that happen to me. I blamed myself

for his violence. When I was still with him, I used to justify his anger and convince myself if I would have talked sweeter to him he wouldn't have hit me. I thought it was my fault. And when my friends would ask questions about the bruises on my body, I would lie to them as much as I would lie to myself. They must've thought I was the clumsiest person they ever met.

Heath's expression is terrifying, his face as red as a boiled lobster. "What's his name? I'll kill him."

"It was a long time ago," I say.

He takes my face in his hands, cradling it. He wipes the tears off my cheeks with his thumbs. "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

"I'm fine, Heath, really. He moved away, we don't speak anymore. Right now, I'm more worried about you. What if the twins tell your parents about Mandi's wedding service and my other marriage?"

"I'll take care of it. You don't have to worry about a thing. This isn't your problem. It's mine."

He starts to leave, but I take him by the arm and stop him. "I meant what I said," I tell him.

He studies me, searching for answers. "Which part?"

The part where I said I loved you.

But I don't say that.

"The part about you being the best man I've ever known."

He kisses me. It's short, but fierce. Then he leaves.

13

Sylph

The next morning I go over to Mandi's apartment. She's finally there. She probably wasn't expecting me to show up in the middle of the day since I'd been trying to get ahold of her mostly in the evenings. Well, she can't get away from me now.

I don't even bother knocking. Instead, I use my key and I'm quiet so she can't disappear into her room. There's loud music playing and she's dancing in the living room. I stand there and watch her for a moment, looking forward to scaring the shit out of her when she finally realizes I'm standing here.

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It takes a while, but when it finally happens, she jumps nearly a foot in the air and it was totally worth it.

“Shit, Sylph, you scared the hell out of me!”

I put my hands on my hips and keep a stern expression even though the look on her face makes me want to crack up. “You’ve been avoiding me,” I say.

Her hand still clutches her chest when she sits on the couch. I wipe crumbs off the couch before sitting next to her. This place has really gone to shit without me being here to pick up after her.

“I have,” she says, resigned.

At least she doesn’t try to lie to me. I would’ve gotten it out of her anyway and she knows it. She’s always been a terrible liar. “Did you know about the P.I. the twins hired to look into my background?” I ask.

She nods, but won’t look me in the eye. “He was looking into me too. That’s why I bailed on you. I was afraid it would affect my business.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me so I could at least tell Heath? His siblings caught us completely off-guard.”

“I thought you would be fine since you’re past is dirt-free, and there’s nothing linking you to my business.”

“I’m not dirt-free. They found out about my ex.”

Mandi’s eyes spring open and so does her mouth. “Sylph, I’m so sorry. I forgot all about that douche bag. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, but I think it upset Heath.”

“I’m sorry.”

I forgive her because she’s my best friend and I need her right now. With everything that has happened, I’ve felt all alone.

“How has everything been going with the job?” she asks.

I hate that she calls it a job, even though that’s technically what it is. Heath stopped being a job for me a long time ago.

“Great, actually. At least it was until his sister showed up and took me dress shopping.”

“Did you find something?” Mandi asks.

“Yeah, but I hate it. I mean, it’s absolutely gorgeous and it looks good on me, but something about it doesn’t feel right.”

Her smile beams. “I know how to make all of this up to you.”

I frown, skeptical. “How?”

“I’m taking you dress shopping. You and I are going to find the dress of your dreams. It’ll be my gift to you.”



I want to tell her no, that the dress I have will work fine, but I don't want to wear it. When I stand at the altar with Heath in front of him, I want to feel beautiful and confident. That's not going to happen in the dress Arora picked out for me.

"Okay," I tell her and start to feel excited about the prospect of finding my dream dress.

Mandi and I go to a local dress store instead of one of those ridiculously over-priced ones like Arora had taken me to. This one has far more selections with better prices and more sizes. My heart feels lighter walking into it and I know I'll find what I'm looking for here. An older woman with big hair and an Eastern European accent helps me to find all the different styles of dresses in my size and within Mandi's budget, and I start trying them on. None of them are as detailed, frilled, or beaded like the other, but they are all still beautiful in their own way.

I try on several that have potential. Every time I come out with a new one, Mandi says, "That's it, that's the one!" They all could be the one, but my heart hasn't sung yet. Maybe it won't. It could be that I'm searching for a feeling that only exists in movies. But I want to keep trying.

The next dress I try on is in a paper shroud so I'm unable to see what it looks like right away. When I pull the paper back, my heart starts to beat a little faster. Right now all I can see are a few little details on the bodice and some pearls and beads, but already, looking at it is giving me chills. Could this be it?

When I pull it out of the bag, I know.

I try the dress on. The woman who owns the dress shop comes into the changing room to help me. There's a lot of fabric to this one. She gasps when she sees me in it and says something in her own language that I can't understand. When I wrinkle my brow in confusion she smiles and says, "This dress was made for you."

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*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:04 am*

I look at my reflection in the mirror, tears welling up in the corners of my eyes. So maybe this feeling I've been searching for isn't fake after all. Everything about the dress is delicate and lovely.

I step out of the dressing room and Mandi is instantly on her feet. She covers her mouth with her hands and says, "Oh my god, Sylph. That's really it this time. That's the one."

I nod and start to cry. So does she.

"Mandi, I'm in love with Heath," I tell her.

She doesn't look surprised. "I know. I can tell by the way you talk about him."

"I know you think it's stupid, and that pursuing him is a mistake, but I'm going to tell him how I feel."

She shakes her head and keeps fluffing the skirt of the dress. "I don't think it's stupid. I just don't want to see you get hurt. But if this is what you want, I will be here for you. No questions asked and no judgement."

I hug her. "And you'll be my maid of honor? Fake wedding or not?"

"Absolutely. You better believe I'm going to catch that bouquet."

Sylph

As soon as I get back to Heath's apartment, I unbox the beautiful dress Mandi bought me. I can't stop looking at it. I want to try it on again, but I'm afraid of getting it dirty. I can't believe we found the dress of my dreams and it was half the price of the one Arora paid for.

I'm admiring it with the box lid off when there's a knock at my door. I open it and find Heath leaning against the door-jam with his hands in his pockets. His lovely smile makes my heart flare up every time.

"Can I come in?" he asks.

"It's your apartment. Your rules. You can come and go as you please." My words come out snarkier than I meant them to. I guess I'm fed up with all of this: the harassment from his siblings, the lies. But mostly I'm sick of having to hide my feelings from him. This has become more than a job for me and I need him to know that.

He tilts his head watches me a moment before coming in. He shuts the door behind him. He motions to the couch and we sit.

I'm about to spill everything, all of my feelings, when he says, "I'm sorry what my brother and sister did to you. What I did to you. We shouldn't have been looking into your past. It was a violation of your privacy and it's clear whatever happened between you and your ex is still painful for you."

A lump forms in my throat. I swallow it down so I can speak. "It's fine. I'm fine," I lie.

He shakes his head. "No, you're not. What happened between you two?"

“I was a stupid kid. I thought he would take care of me, but it seemed he was looking for more of a pet than a partner—actually, no. That’s not it. People treat their pets far better than he ever treated me. I just wanted someone who would be there for me. I kept trying to change him, and I was too embarrassed to admit I’d messed up, so I stayed.”

“What made you finally decide to leave?” he asks.

I look off to the side, away from him. I can’t face him when I admit the truth of what happened.

“He came home one day and I didn’t have his clothes washed and ready for a football game he was going to. He punched me in the face and gave me a bloody nose and black eye. I called Mandi after he left for the game and she came over and helped me pack. I left that night and I never went back.”

Heath’s hands are shaking. It’s obvious he’s trying to hold back his rage. “I’m going to make sure no one ever hurts you again.”

“You can’t make sure of that. After this job, when we go our separate ways, you can’t protect me.”

“Marry me,” he says.

“Isn’t that already the plan?”

“I mean for real. I’m in love with you and I want you to marry me.”

My eyes nearly jump out of their sockets and my mouth springs open. “What?”

“It sounds crazy, I know, and I might actually be losing my mind. I wasn’t supposed

to fall in love with the woman I paid to marry me. All I wanted was to run my company without my family lurking over my shoulder, but ... then you came into my life and shook everything up. I love you, Sylph.”

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Tears stream down my face. When the hell did I start crying? I honestly don't remember.

"I love you too," I admit, my voice thick from crying. "I've been holding it in because I didn't think you felt the same, but I fell for you the moment I kissed you in the park and it's been a downward spiral ever since."

He kisses me so softly our lips barely touch. "Marry me," he whispers.

"Okay." I'm nodding and laughing and crying all at once.

He kisses me again, but this time he does it with urgency. It's as if I'll slip out of his hands if he doesn't kiss me hard enough. The desperation between us grows and this kiss feels different than all the others that came before. Our confessions have changed everything.

He breaks our kiss, leaving me breathless and lightheaded. Then he gets down on his knees and pulls something out of his pocket. When he opens his hand, it's a velvet box.

My entire body starts to shake and suddenly things feel a whole lot realer than they did just a few seconds ago. He opens the box and inside is the biggest princess cut diamond I've ever seen. Jesus Christ, will my finger even be strong enough to hold that thing up?

My hand is shaking so badly it blurs when he slips the platinum band on my finger. "I hope this is okay. My mom helped me pick it out."

His mother has expensive taste, but there's something sweet about him asking for her help in picking it out. It makes me feel so much better about his family. She wouldn't have helped him if she objected to this marriage, would she?

"It's perfect." I put my hand to my chest and hug it tightly.

I slide off the couch and get on my knees so we're face to face. "We're going to fuck now and I don't want to hear any bullshit about you waiting until our wedding day. Okay?"

He laughs. The sound fills every empty part of me until I feel whole again. "Not a chance."

"Good."

I kiss him hard. His mouth devours mine. He wastes no time getting my clothes off of me, practically ripping my panties off my body. He bends me over the couch and I know this isn't going to be gentle love-making. This is weeks of built-up lust and tension that's been begging for release. This is going to be like two caged animals going at it. The anticipation of it is so excited I'm shaking.

He gets behind me and grabs my ponytail, pulling my head back so he can kiss me. I moan into his mouth as he slides deep inside my pussy. I close my eyes as the sensation of being filled overwhelms me. Heath fills me like no silicone dildo can. I'm stretched and loving every second of it. He starts to pound into me. Our skin slaps together and the friction of our fucking makes a loud, wet squelching sound.

He lets go of my hair and grabs my ass cheeks, pulling them apart. He groans, obviously liking what he sees. He has the perfect view of him entering me. I'm jealous that he gets to watch, but too lost in my own pleasure to be too upset about it.

He pulls out of me, leaving me with a lost, empty feeling. He sits on the couch and grabs my hips, pulling me toward him. I climb up on the couch and sit on his dick, impaling myself hard and quick. At this angle I can feel him in the furthest depths of my pussy. He's so deep it almost hurts, but with the pain comes immense pleasure that's like nothing I've ever felt before.

"Your pussy feels so good," he says as I bounce on his cock. He stokes my clit and it feels so good I let out a loud moan. He strokes faster. If he keeps that up, I won't last much longer.

I start to ride him faster, harder. I'm so close. But before I can come, he pulls me off of him lays me on the couch. This time he lays on top of me and I like it like this because I can look into his perfect face and see those beautiful eyes. I love the way his mouth parts when he slides into me. He kisses me, and bite's my bottom lip softly, then licks it. He nibbles on my nipple next and a fiery sensation shoots straight from my nipple down to my clit and I gasp.

"That perfect pussy belongs to me now," he says, thrusting harder.

"I'm all yours," I tell him, barely able to get the words out.

I feel my muscles clinch, and it's here. I can't hold back my orgasm any longer. He plunges into me hard and deep one more time and I scream and writhe beneath him. He fucks me like a piston, grunting and growling until he too loses his battle of self-control.



## Page 34

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He pulls out and his cum drips from my opening onto the couch.

He leans over and brushes the hair off my face. “I can’t believe I get to have you all to myself. I’m the luckiest man alive,” he says.

I lay there, basking in the afterglow of having sex with the most beautiful man I’ve ever met. He’s going to be my husband. That thought no longer scares me. Not with Heath. He’s changed everything. I never thought I would ever wear a wedding ring again, or pledge myself to anyone and now I can’t wait to walk down that aisle and be Mrs. Heath Starre.

He stays on top of me, brushing my sweaty hair out of my face. He kisses my forehead, the tip of my nose, my chin, my lips.

“I’m going to be the perfect wife for you,” I tell him.

“I know. You’re already perfect.”

“I can’t believe this is real. I didn’t think I could ever love someone as much as I love you.”

“I feel the same way. Before I met you I was sure I would be alone forever. I wasn’t about to enter some loveless marriage like my friends. I can’t wait to start my life with you and have a family.”

The way he’s looking at me makes my heart feel like it’s going to burst, and the mention of a family, I don’t know why, but that part didn’t occur to me until just

now.

“You want kids?” I ask. It surprises me a little. He lives this high-powered, structured life. It never occurred to me that he might want children. I bet he would be a great dad.

“With you, absolutely. My dad wasn’t there when I was growing up. Most the time I can’t understand why he even bothered. I’m going to change that. My son or daughter is going to have all the love in the world with two parents who adore each other.”

I tear up. I can’t help it. “I want that too,” I say.

He gives me a devilish grin. “Maybe we should start trying now.”

“Absolutely,” I tell him as he slips back inside of me for another round.

Heath is full of surprises. Before the wedding he flew my parents in. They were shocked, to say the least, when they found I was getting married. Luckily Heath filled them in about everything, how it was all supposed to be fake, but then we fell in love. It didn’t take my mom long to be smitten by Heath. She’s upset I didn’t tell her, but she understands. I’m so happy to have my best friend and my family at my wedding. This day couldn’t get any better.

But it seems it could get worse ...

As I’m walking into the hotel room to get dressed, I’m cornered by the twins and Heath’s parents.

“What is this all about?” Heath’s mother says to the twins. She and Heath’s father both look nervous and I realize this is some kind of set up from the twins. They’re up to something. They want to sabotage my wedding and this time I don’t have Heath to

back me up. Where's Mandi when I need her? She has a knack for talking herself out of any situation. It looks like I'm on my own and I'm not sure what to do.

"I'd like to know the same thing," I say, even though I already know what this is about. Now I have to figure out a way to get myself out of it. These two little trolls aren't going to ruin my wedding day or my happiness with Heath. Not if I can help it.

"I guess if Heath isn't going to say anything, we will," Arora says.

"Say what?" Heath's dad says, annoyed. He's a handsome older man and has aged well. It's like looking at Heath in the future. I just hope Heath isn't as stern, though I doubt he will be. The person I've come to know and love might be hard on the outside—in more ways than one—but he's a big teddy bear within and I don't see that changing anytime soon.

"Sylph was married before. She's been lying to everyone this entire time," Theo says.

Heath's mom looks at her children, then at me. "Is this true?"

I stand tall and hold my head up. I'm not going to let those punk twins make me feel guilty for a mistake I made when I was eighteen. Especially when it wasn't my fault the marriage ended. I did nothing wrong. I tried to be a good wife, but I was hit in return. No one is going to shame me for that.

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“I didn’t lie about anything,” I say. “It’s true, I was married before and it was the biggest mistake of my life. All I’m guilty of is picking the wrong man to love. I’m about to fix that right now.”

I look at the twins, challenging them with a glare to say more. They look shocked. They are used to me playing nice and hiding behind their brother, but not anymore. I’m going to stand up to these rich snobs from now on.

“Shame on you for trying to sabotage your brother’s wedding,” Heath’s mom scolds.

“Get your asses back on that lawn and stop meddling where you don’t belong,” Heath’s dad says.

The twins look like they got spanked and I couldn’t be happier.

Heath’s mom gives me a reassuring hug and says, “Welcome to the family, dear.”

Heath’s dad gives me a straight-faced pat on the shoulder. I’m guessing that’s the closest thing to affection I’ll get from him. Then they leave and I feel so much better. I may never have the twins’ approval, but at least his parents are happy for us.

My mom and Mandi help me get dressed. My hair and makeup are flawless. When I stand in front of the mirror when everything is done, I’m thankful for waterproof makeup. The end result is better than I could’ve imagined.

“You look like a princess,” Mandi says, shedding her own tears. There’s not a dry eye in the room.

“How do you feel, honey?” my mom asks. I can tell by the wrinkle between her eyes that she’s nervous. She hasn’t had much time to get used to the fact that I’m getting married.

“I feel happy,” I say, my smile lighting up my face as I stare at her through the reflection in the mirror. “I don’t know if I’ve ever been this happy before.”

Her smile mirrors mine.

There’s a quiet knock on the door and a woman comes in. She’s the wedding planner Heath’s parents hired. “It’s time,” she says.

I take a deep breath and we make our way to the lawn.

I’m so nervous that my entire body is shaking. I’m afraid my voice will do the same once I’m standing at the altar, saying my vows. But once I walk out onto those stairs and see Heath waiting for me, any traces of fear I felt dissipate. He is my future, my life, my love. He’s my rock and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

15

Heath

“Where are we going?” Sylph asks for the hundredth time as the driver takes us to the airport. He has instructions not to say a word so he continues to ignore her.

I laugh as she folds her arms over her chest and she sits back against the seat. “Everyone is so damn loyal to you,” she says, poking me in the side.

“Sit back, relax,” I say, though I know she’s incapable of it. She hates surprises. I do, too, so I can understand her frustration, but I know when she finds out where I’m

taking her on our honeymoon she'll love it.

"How can I relax? You wouldn't even let me pack my own bag."

"Mandi is fully capable of packing your bags. She knows where we're going and what you will need."

"I still can't believe she wouldn't tell me. She tells me everything!"

I just smile.

We get to the airport and check our bags. When we're given our tickets, the woman at the counter says, "Enjoy your flight to Greece."

Sylph screams. Literally screams in the airport with all these people standing around us. People are staring as she leaps into my arms, choking me in a bear hug. She's stronger than she looks. We're probably going to be pulled aside and frisked by the TSA because of her excitement, but it's totally worth it to see how happy she is.

She finally releases me and I'm able to breathe again. "I've always wanted to go to Greece. How did you know?" she says.

"Besides all the travel magazines you leave lying around the apartment?"

"I didn't think you were paying attention to those."

"I pay attention to everything when it comes to you."

The smile she gives me makes everything we've been through worth the struggle it took to get to where we are now.

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*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:04 am*

“I love you so much,” she says. Her words are thick with emotion and I can tell she’s struggling not to cry.

I take her in my arms and kiss her forehead. “I love you more.”

I never thought I was capable of loving someone as much as I love Sylph. My wife. It’s crazy to think that I’m married now. I always thought marriage for me was somewhere in the distant future, if at all. Now that I’ve found my soulmate, it’s hard to believe I was able to live without her for all these years. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with the girl of my dreams. My life finally feels complete.

### Epilogue

#### Two Years Later

The men at the country club I belong to warned me that once Sylph got pregnant the magic would be gone. They said my physical attraction to her would cease to exist. Standing here in the bathroom with her, I can say definitively, that they are wrong. I kept waiting for that day when I would look at her and my heart would stop giving that little jolt of excitement. When my dick would stop rising at the sight of her naked body. It hasn’t happened and I doubt it ever will.

She’s now eight months pregnant and still the sexiest woman alive. If anything, I’m more attracted to her than ever before, if that’s even possible. She seems to glow from within, radiating vitality and sex appeal—and the fact that she’s always horny because of all the hormones coursing through her doesn’t hurt our sex life one bit. That baby bump of hers is evidence of our connection, our bond, our love. That little

boy growing inside of her is the perfect combination of us both. How could that possibly be a turn-off?

Sylph stands in front of the bathroom mirror, brushing her hair while I brush my teeth. She glances at me and smiles. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I spit toothpaste and rinse my mouth. “Because you’re beautiful.”

She looks down at the towel wrapped around her, her belly poking out. “I’m as big as a house.”

“You’re the sexiest house I’ve ever seen.”

She laughs and drops the towel on the floor. I’m already hard, but seeing her naked makes me ache.

“How about you join this sexy house in the shower and wash my back?” she says.

She’s giving me those sex eyes. Whenever she looks at me like that, I know exactly what she wants.

The water is on, warm and comfortable. I kiss her while slathering her in body wash. I love the way her skin feels when it’s slick with soap. I massage her round belly and make my way up to her breasts. They’ve grown huge. That’s been a fun development. They are heavy and gorgeous, her red nipples have doubled in size and have grown more sensitive. Just licking them makes her whole body quiver.

She makes little mewling sounds and begs me to fuck her as I pinch and pull at her nipples.

“I will, but not yet,” I tell her. She deserves to feel good. She deserves special



attention first. I get down on my knees and spread her pussy lips. She lifts her leg and puts foot up on the ledge, opening herself up to me. Finding her clit, I suck the slippery nub it into my mouth. I'm addicted to the taste and smell of her, a heady peachy flavor that makes me insane with desire. She lets out a loud cry as I swirl my tongue around the hard knot of sensitive flesh.

She holds the back of my head and pushes her pussy against my face. Fuck, she's incredible. She's in a frenzy now, humping at my face, smearing my lips, nose, and chin with her abundant juices. It drives me wild. She's so wet and horny and ready for me. I plunge my tongue inside of her, and then add several fingers as well.

"More," she begs.

I give her more, adding fingers until she's stretched as far as I've ever taken her. I could probably stretch her further still. She's warm and pliable and likes a bit of pain with her pleasure, but right now, I'm just trying to make her feel good.

I pull my fingers out. They're coated in her juices and I use it to stroke my cock a few times. I then turn her around so her ass is to me. I slide my dick into her from behind, rubbing her belly and caressing her full tits. She begs me not to stop.

Not a chance.

"Fuck me hard," she begs.

My girl can't get enough. I know that, even after we both come, it won't be the last time tonight.

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I grab her hips, and plunge into her with all my strength. She screams and cries, “Yes, give it to me.”

I fuck her at full force until her entire body convulses from her orgasm. She turns off the water, out of breath. I lean my forehead against her back as I start to come down from my own climax.

She looks over her shoulder and smiles at me. “Ready for round two?” she says.

I laugh, my breath still struggling to slow down. I pull out of her, my cum spilling out onto the tile at our feet.

“I might need a minute to catch my breath,” I admit. “Isn’t your pussy sore after being stretched and pounded?”

She spreads her cheeks apart, giving me a sexy view of her little asshole, and wiggles her butt playfully. “I have other holes too, you know.”

She gives me a flirty smile and gets out of the shower. My cock is already hard again.

She sees it and her smile widens. “I’ll meet you in bed.”

I let out quiet laughter. I have a feeling after she has this baby, it won’t be long before she’s pregnant again.

THE END

Keep reading for my special Bonus Story!

The Billionaire's Toy!

The Billionaire's Toy

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The Billionaire's Toy

1

You know, Mondays suck enough without being fired. I scrub the tears off my face as I step off the elevator onto my floor. Damn my speaking voice. I've always had a naturally loud and brassy voice, and people mistake my normal speaking tone as raising my voice or somehow being aggressive. It's not...it's just me. But one too many complaints about my customer service because people think I'm yelling at them, and now I'm unemployed.

Okay, fine. Maybe sometimes I yell at them, but I swear that the customer is not always right.

I turn the corner and wish I hadn't. My Super is walking down the hallway towards me and I've been trying to avoid him the way you try to avoid STDs. AT ALL COSTS. I'm a week late on my rent because some months are harder than others, and if I have to choose between rent and food, I'd rather not starve.

I give him a weak smile. "Hey, Joe."

There's no smile from him. "I need your check, Delia."

"I know. My car broke down last week and I had to have it fixed so I could actually get to work. It's coming; I swear." I hope he buys the lie. In the years I've been living here, I've never had a car. I'm hoping that he hasn't noticed.

He sighs. "I can't give you much more time. There are plenty of people waiting for apartments in this building, and if you can't pay then someone else will."

"I can. I will." I swallow, brushing past him to my door and hurrying inside so he can't pressure me anymore and I don't accidentally give away that I just lost my job. If he knew that, he'd be furious, and I'd be out of time. Hell, once I get some work, maybe I should move. I'm sure I can find somewhere less expensive and without a super as overbearing as Joe.

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I drop my purse on the ground and flop down on the couch, sliding down until my neck is leaning on the cushion and my legs are sprawled out on the floor. The absolute picture of grace. My cell phone buzzes and I groan. Can everyone just go away and let me hide under a rock for an hour? Please?

The phone buzzes again and I shimmy it out of my pocket so I can see the screen. Two text messages.

What the fuck happened?

Get your ass to this bar and spill.

There's a reason people call my best friend Fleece. First, she can be as cuddly as one of those blankets when she likes you, but she can also rip you a new one. Only she could get away with a nickname that has a double meaning. Don't get caught calling her by her actual name—Veronica—or you'll be getting the wrong end of that nickname.

While I'm looking at the screen, the phone buzzes again.

I called the store to make dinner plans. I'm giving you 10 minutes before I start calling you every 5.

I roll my eyes. She's not exaggerating. Even while she's at work, she'll make it happen. I text her back.

Fine. I'm on my way.

The response comes lightning fast.

Nine minutes, thirty seconds.

Even though I'm exhausted and I feel like I'm made of stone, I drag myself off the couch. I'm not bothering to change. The bar gets to see me in my utterly sexy khakis and black polo shirt. Luckily, Joe isn't anywhere to be seen as I leave the building and start the six-block walk to the Blind Scorpion. Fleece and I discovered this bar when we first moved to New York. Close enough to both our apartments to walk home, and prices that didn't break our college students' budgets. Five years later, Fleece is one of the best bartenders in town and practically runs the place as her survival job. And I...have no job.

Shit.

I push open the door to the bar and get a blast of cool air. New York in the summer is hot but you can always rely on the Blind Scorpion to cool you down. Fleece sees me and checks her phone. I know she's looking to see how much time I've got left on her timer. She points down to the seat at the end—a dark corner where I lurk and we steal moments to gossip—and gives me her signature glare.

The hard high bar stool somehow feels comfortable. I've sat here so often that my ass is used to being shaped by this seat. It's almost like a homecoming.

Fleece smacks a glass full of something in front of me. "Drink. What happened?"

"What do you think happened? I clearly won employee of the year."

"Don't do that," she says, more gently. "You can tell me."

I sigh, downing half of the glass she put in front of me. It's delicious and sweet,



something with a hint of apple and a little bit of a bite. “I had another complaint.”

She winces and tries to hide it with a smile, but I see it. “Sorry,” she says. “Same reason?”

“I swear I’m not yelling at them,” I say. My voice carries across the bar and at least two people look in my direction. Perfect.

Fleece starts laughing. “Of course you weren’t. Unless you were.”

I roll my eyes. “I know I’ve done that before, but I swear this time I wasn’t actually yelling. I was trying to be nice.”

“So why would they fire you?”

“Once they tag you as having a temper, it seems like they can’t get it out of their heads. Any complaint all of a sudden has to do with my temper, and I had t

oo many customer complaints in too short a time. They have a policy.”

“That sucks.”

“Plus,” I say, “I ran into Joe when I got home. He’s practically stalking me for the rent which I can’t give him because I am now broke and unemployed.”

Someone signals Fleece down the bar and she turns to me. “Look, hold that thought. Everything’s going to be fine. I think I might know a way to help you.”

I sit with my drink, taking occasional sips and gathering the confidence to tell Fleece no, she cannot lend me money again, no matter how much it might save my ass. The bar is busy tonight, especially for a Monday, and Fleece looks like she’s struggling to

keep up. I look around and see a couple of waiters, but the bar seems really understaffed today.

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When she finally manages to find a second to come back over, she's practically out of breath.

"Why is it so busy?" I ask.

"No fucking clue. And Barbara is sick, so I'm all on my own back here tonight. She also gave her flu to the waiters she's sleeping with."

I choke on my drink. "Waiters? Plural? Isn't the idea generally not to sleep with your employees?"

"I think Barbara does whatever and whoever she wants. But enough about that, check your email. I sent you something I think is going to help you."

Pulling out my phone, I pull open the new email from her. I recognize the heading and the format—I've seen them before in her emails. I roll my eyes. "Fleece, this is a model casting call."

"Yes, it is," she says, replacing my drink. "My agent sent it to me and I can't go. I'm way too busy with everything here, and Barbara out for who knows how long. On top of that, I'm not the kind of model they hire."

"You can't be serious."

"And why wouldn't I be serious about helping my best friend?"

I hold a hand to stop her, "No, I know, and I'm grateful, but you're you. You're

glamorous and you know how to do this. I am not glamorous and I have no idea how to do what you do.”

Fleece pushes my drink at me and I take another sip. “It’s really not that hard, I promise. Besides, how many times have you seen me walk or pose? Just copy me. You’re gorgeous and they would be lucky to have you.”

Anxiety swims in my stomach. “I don’t know.”

“Will you at least look at the email?

I glance at my phone. “Xellum Studios? I’ve heard of them. Why won’t they hire you?”

She shrugs, “They have a darker aesthetic and rarely hire blondes. But you’d be perfect.”

“You’re forgetting again that I’m not a model.” I laugh. “I don’t have an agent.”

She taps my phone. “That’s why it’s perfect. You don’t have to have an agent to go to this one. Just be there early and get in line.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Who knows? Sometimes I think the same models get sent over and over again to castings, and if they don’t find what they want, they’ll try somebody new. I think you’ve got a look they’ll like.”

I roll my eyes again, my stomach churning with anxiety just thinking about it. “I think you’ve been drinking on the job.”

She laughs, but she shakes her head. “I’m serious. Just walk like you’re trying to get a guy to look at your ass, but you’ve also got a stick up that same ass, and you’ll be fine.”

Liquid bubbles out of my mouth and I reach for napkins as I laugh, unable to control myself. “Is that what you think about when you’re walking in shows?”

“Hell yes.”

“This makes your runway bitch face ten times more hilarious.”

She cracks a grin, and I know that runway bitch face is going to have more trouble at her next show. “Seriously though, go to the casting. It’s tomorrow. You’re not going to schedule any interviews by tomorrow anyway.”

I take another sip of my drink. “The real question is if you’re going to let me leave this bar without actually signing up for the call.”

Fleece sweeps her blonde hair over her shoulder and smirks. “Not a fucking chance.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

2

This was a terrible idea. I’m not as early as I wanted to be. Some people might call it “late,” but I’m choosing to call it “fashionable.” I admit that one popped into my head and made me laugh more than it should have. Probably because of the nerves. I’ve been debating just not showing up all morning. I don’t think I can do this. No matter what, it’s not as easy as Fleece says.

I finally walk up to a white storefront in downtown Manhattan. I don’t come down

here that often, but I know this is the place. There are tall, beautiful women milling around the entrance to the store; some talking, some leaving.

A woman in her forties with a headset and a clipboard is standing in the doorway. I'm guessing I need to speak with her. I jog up the couple of steps to where she's standing and smile. "Hi, I'm Delia Cameron."

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She gives me a once-over and looks down at her list. “You’re late.”

“Yeah, sorry.” I give her apologetic smile. “Train delays.” The one lie that everyone in New York City will believe.

She purses her lips. “Yes, well, if you’re cast, Mr. Xellum will expect you to be punctual. His time is literally money.” She waves me inside. “You’re the last one. Come on, we’ll get you in some clothes while the others are finishing up. I’m May, Mr. Xellum’s assistant.”

She leads me through the store—a bright white space filled with clothes in surprising shapes and colors. They’re all something I would buy if I weren’t broke. It’s a total New York dream: wall-to-wall windows and racks of stunning clothes. Soft club music plays in the background, and a model is walking back and forth in front of a table with several people.

May stops at the edge of the room, and we wait as the model finishes. “We’ll see what Mr. Xellum wants you to walk in before having you change.”

The table has three people behind it, and only one man. Holy. Fucking. Shit.

This is the kind of man that appears shirtless on a beach in perfume ads. He is—should be—a model, not looking for them. He’s relaxed in his chair, a lazy grace that contrasts with the look on his face. That look could take down anyone, and I’m not sure I want to be on the receiving end of it. Especially not since I was late.

The model finishes her walk, and Mr. Xellum gives her a curt nod. “Thank you for

coming in. We'll be in touch."

She walks off towards a changing screen, and May ushers me forward. "One more, Mr. Xellum. Last one."

Suddenly I'm pinned to the spot because his gaze has fallen on me. He hasn't even moved, but it's like something shifted. His eyes travel up and down my body, and I blush, because the gaze is intimate. He sees everything about me, through my clothes and down to my bones. At least that's how it feels.

He stands, straightening his suit, and steps out from behind the table. He holds out a hand to me, a small smile on his face, which only makes me look at his jaw and damn that's a pretty sight. "I'm Andrew Xellum," he says. "And you are...?"

"Delia Cameron," I manage to get out, though my voice sounds like I've been running for ten blocks. Get it together girl.

His stare is still so intense, and that little smile on his lips is maddening. I want to know what he's thinking since I know in this second he's thinking about me. Abruptly he turns, breaking our eye contact, and I feel hollow. It's like his gaze was holding me up and now I'm ready to collapse. He takes a dress off a nearby rack of clothes. It's pale blue and it floats lightly as he hands it to me. "Walk in this please," he says, and nods at the changing screen.

"You haven't even looked at my measurements."

He raises an eyebrow, and that little smile is back, even stronger. "I do this every day. I can tell just by looking at you." He emphasizes his words with a long, slow look from my head to my toes, and I swear I can feel it on my skin, and my knees feel wobbly. I mumble something and take the dress from him. This is insane. Why did I let Fleece talk me into this? Auditioning for a job was what I signed up for, not



humiliating myself in front of the hottest man I've ever seen. Now I'm going to make a fool of myself because I'm not a model and I'm probably going to fall flat on my face.

The dress is layers of sheer fabric so light they seem to blend in to my pale skin, like the dress is almost growing out of me. The effect is gorgeous, like I was born in it. The downside is that I have to take off everything. Everything. Even the slightest shadow of underwear beneath this dress will ruin the effect, and for some reason I want him to see me like this. I want him to see the effect he was hoping to create even though I'm sick to my stomach with anxiety.

I step out from behind the screen and his eyes are on me instantly. For just a second, I think I see him do a double take, but then he's smiling. "Walk, please."

He goes back to the table, and I do my best to ignore the fact that he's staring at me with a hunger that's heating up my skin. Here goes nothing. I walk just like Fleece said: like I have a stick up my ass but I want to have someone look at it anyway. That's not a hard thing to do because I desperately want him to look at me. To keep looking. It's the most attention I've gotten from the opposite sex in months, and I'm surprised to realize how much I've missed it.

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Before I know it, I've walked back and forth across the room and stopped. I didn't fall over, so at the very least I can walk out of here knowing that. I'm looking at Mr. Xellum, and he's looking at me. I don't dare break the pose I've ended in. He tilts his head, a curious expression on his face. "You don't have an agent."

It's not a question. "No."

"I didn't think so. I would have remembered you." A fierce blush rises to my cheeks. "And do you have any modeling experience?"

I press my lips together for a second before answering. "None at all."

"Good," he nods. "I wanted somebody who is a raw talent." I try to smile, try to wrap my head around the fact that he thinks I have any talent in at all. "If you don't have an agent, and you don't model, how did you end up here? I'm just curious."

"I have a friend," I say. "She didn't think the casting was right for her but she encouraged me to come. I'm recently out of work and had nothing to lose."

He chuckles. "I like that you're honest about it. Why didn't your friend come?"

I raise an eyebrow and aim for honesty. "You don't hire blondes."

"Not often, no," he says. "I find that dark hair contrasts with my clothes in a way I like. But regardless, encourage your friend to come to my next casting. I owe her one."

“Why?”

“Because she sent you.” He stands again, and comes around the table. “I’d like you to be at the Flatiron building tomorrow, noon sharp.” Giving me another slow look in the dress he designed, he walks past me and out the door.

I take a breath and it feels like waking up. “What on earth does that mean?” I ask to no one in particular.

May smiles kindly at me. “It means you’re hired, dear, for at least the exhibition tomorrow. Please, don’t be late.”

“Wait though, is that just how he is? Is he always that intense?”

“Oh, yes,” she says. “Don’t worry, if you work with him, you’ll get used to it. He’s very direct and never lies. In this business, it’s refreshing.”

Handing me a paper with the official details for the next day, May ushers me back towards the changing screen. “We’ll see you in the lobby of the building tomorrow.”

And then she’s gone. I change out of the dress as quickly as I can and leave the store, trying to avoid the murderous glances of the other models milling around, maybe hoping for another glimpse of Xellum. Is it possible that they figured out that I was picked?

I pull my cell phone out of my bag as I hurry towards the subway. Fleece is never going to believe this.

3

The Flatiron building has always been one of my favorite buildings in the city.

Gorgeous architecture and a great neighborhood. All benefits for me.

I made sure to leave my house earlier than I normally would, and make it in plenty of time. Fleece and I aren't even exactly sure what the exhibition is, even though we spent more than enough time last night poring over the casting call for any details they might have slipped in. There was nothing. The only thing we know is that it will be over the top. Everything that Andrew Xellum does is over the top, which does nothing to ease the growing ball of nerves in my stomach. But at the very least, Fleece did coach me through what I would be doing with hair and make-up and what to say in case I have any problems. She'd be a good agent, if that were her thing.

Even though I'm early, May is waiting in the lobby of the building. She gives me a warm smile, and I know that at least part of it is relief that I'm not late. "Right this way."

She sweeps me through a side door into a tiny room that's been converted into a dressing room. There are already way too many people in here. Oh god, I can't breathe. What if this is a mistake? I need a second to stall. I pull May to the side. "Sorry, I just want to know what it is exactly that I'm doing before I go in there."

Her face goes blank for a second. "Oh, I'm sorry sweetie. I forgot that you don't have an agent that would have told you. Today Mr. Xellum is having a display of his clothes in the Prow Art Space. You'll be on a rotating platform, and every 10 minutes, the curtains drop for you to change clothes."

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Nerves crawl in my gut. “So I’ll be just standing there with people looking at me?” I guess that’s what modeling is, but doing it in a window somehow seems really different than walking down a runway.

“Yes, that’s the idea. A living mannequin who can change her pose and make the clothes come to life. And you’ll be modeling day and evening counterparts. Convertible clothes that a woman can spend the whole day in.” She leads me inside. “Oh, and before I forget, here’s your pay rate. I’ll need your bank details for direct deposit.”

I look down at the piece of paper that she’s handed me. I struggle to keep my jaw from dropping. “Are you serious?” To a lot of people, three thousand dollars might not seem like a lot of money, but it’s going to save my ass. I’ll be able to pay my rent and my bills.

May laughs, “Yes, we’re serious. If Mr. Xellum likes your performance, I’m sure you’ll be up for more jobs. Once he takes a liking to someone, there’s always work.” She pushes me into the make-up chair with a firm hand on my shoulder.

“If that’s true, then why was he looking for someone new?”

She smiles. “Mr. Xellum can be a bit...avant-grade with his shows. Not everyone is up for it. This one is tame by his usual standards.”

I nod, making a note to look up his other work when I get home this evening. I was too nervous to look at much last night because I would imagine myself doing those crazy things and it didn’t help my nerves. I send up a prayer that the things he has

planned aren't too out there for me. If the money is this good for every job, it could really change my life.

May rushes away, and I'm left in the room with a bunch of strangers. A bunch of strangers whose job it is to make me perfect for this exhibition. The make-up artist goes to work on me, and over the next thirty minutes, I transform from someone ordinary into a dark-eyed woman with sexy, curly hair and shiny lips.

Never in my life have I looked this good, and when I tell the make-up artist, she laughs.

"I don't know about that," a deep voice says from behind me. "I imagine you look this good all the time."

Andrew Xellum is standing in the doorway, that same hungry look on his face as he takes in my hair and make-up. He glances at my crew. "I need to show her the space."

My make-up artist nods. "She's ready; everything but touch-ups."

"Excellent. Delia, if you'll come with me please."

I stand and follow him. We go down a narrow hallway and into a windowed space covered in curtains. I recognize it as the inside of the Prow Art Space, the tiny glass gallery on the very tip of the flatiron building. The ground is covered in gauze and fluffy fabric that makes it look like we're walking on a cloud, and I imagine that it will look that way from the outside as well. Just like May described, there's a circular platform. Andrew—can I call him Andrew if it's only in my head?—holds out his hand. "Up here, please."

An electric jolt goes through me as our skin makes contact. I can feel that touch through my entire body and damn, does it feel good. Suddenly I'm trying to

remember the last time I was touched by a man, even casually. It's been way too long if a touch on the hand is making my body feel this way. Or maybe it's him. Holy shit, I'm staring at our joined hands and this is my new boss. I blush furiously and he gives me a smirk that makes it seem like he knows exactly what that skin-on-skin contact did to me.

"You'll be up here the entire exhibition. You won't have to move. The curtains will rise, and you'll be in the first outfit. After 10 minutes, the crew will come in and convert the look from day to night. That will be in full view; it's the whole point. The clothes are designed to change tone quickly, and you won't ever be exposed. After the next ten minutes, the curtains fall and the crew will help you do a quick change before they rise again. Pretty simple."

I clear my throat. "Do you want me to stand still? Change poses?"

It's such a basic question, something a more experienced model should know, that I almost expect him to laugh. I'm desperate for any clue on how to do this and keep down the latte that I had earlier. But he doesn't laugh. He considers, stepping back and taking me in, even though I'm only in my tank top and jeans. "You can move," he says after a moment of silence. "Just not too fast. I'd say maybe two or three poses per look. That will give you time for a couple of revolutions for each pose."

“Okay,” I nod. “I can do that.”

Andrew checks his watch. “Curtains go up in fifteen minutes,” he says with a little smile. “I’ll be watching.”

A shiver goes through me as he turns to leave, and my mouth opens before I can stop it. “Why me?” He turns back at the door. “You could have had so many models with more experience. Not someone who’s never modeled before. So why?”

Just like with my earlier question, I can see him consider his words carefully. “Most people in fashion are looking for something brand new. A look or a combination of features that they’ve never seen before. That’s not what I look for in a model. I want someone who makes me feel. When she walks down a runway or you see her in a photograph, she has a spark that connects with you.”

“So you’re saying you think that I have that spark?”

He smiles. “No. You don’t have the spark. You have the whole damn fire.”

And then he leaves me there gaping after him, my entire body tingling with his words.

One of the crew comes to get me, and while they dress me I’m in a daze. I don’t think I’ve ever made that kind of impression on anyone before. And the way he looks at me gives me shivers down my body that make me imagine darker, more intimate moments with just the two of us between a set of sheets.



I lock those thoughts down because this is a job, and he's my boss and I can't afford to think like that when I'm about to be stared at for four hours. I'm dressed in a pair of long bolero pants and a coral dress shirt, and my face and hair get tweaks as I'm guided down the narrow hallway again.

God, I can't believe I'm doing this. I've never been afraid of getting up in front of people, but this feels entirely different. New. Nerve-wracking. I'm helped up onto the platform, and I wobble in my heels. They arrange my pants around the shoes and I nearly lose my footing again as the rotating platform starts to move. Suddenly there's music, and I know that the music will play outside as well. The curtain starts to go up and I try to control my breathing as I pick a pose. This is real. This is real. This is real.

There's a crowd of people gathered outside the windows. Of course there is. If what May said is true, then Andrew Xellum is famous for works of fashion bordering on performance art. Anyone like that is going to have fans that show up to see his next piece of work. Oh god, I might throw up. Don't look at them. Don't look at them. I don't focus on the faces; I focus beyond them as I'm turned around slowly. I pick a point and stare at it for as long as I can, and it helps me keep my balance. If I'm going to be rotating for four hours I can't afford to be dizzy.

I'm on my second rotation when I see Andrew. He's standing further back from the crowd, watching just like he said he would be. All those thoughts I tried to lock down come flooding back and my focus narrows to just him. I don't feel dizzy or overwhelmed or panicked. Instead I feel a new kind of focus, that crippling nervousness I felt moments ago melting away. I slowly change my pose, aware that his eyes are on me, and the movement is slow, sensual, and right. I suppose if you have the right audience you can always find what feels right.

There's not enough time to think about what Andrew Xellum being the right audience means because the crew is here and they're changing the look. A few clever hooks in

hidden places and the bolero pants separate and are folded up into a sexy short skirt. Openings in the sleeves of the blouse appear to show a little more skin, and suddenly it feels like I'm ready to go dancing.

I let a smile appear on my face as I change my pose and rotate. I see Andrew nod. He likes this. I like it too. It's not nearly as hard as I thought it would be, especially when I can feel his eyes on me. It feels like no time at all until the curtains drop and I'm whirled into the next outfit, and then the next. There's a theme to the clothes, each look starting out tame, and becoming sexier and sexier with each transition. I feel sexy too, knowing that wherever he is, he's watching. He's been moving around outside the window, and every time I find him again I get a burst of energy.

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The curtains drop and the crew rushes in. “Last one,” someone whispers to me. It’s a deep purple gown with a plunging neckline, lace sleeves and plenty of sheer material around my legs. This is definitely the most couture of the things I’ve had on today. I step into the dress, and there’s some type of body suit inside, but I don’t have a good picture of what the transformation will be. It doesn’t matter though because I’m high on the moment.

The curtains rise and I sweep the skirt out and let it drop. I can’t be a mannequin in this dress, it needs movement. I break my rules for this one, and I don’t stop moving. Even though it’s slow so I don’t fall off my pedestal, I dance, swaying with the music that’s flowing through the speakers and making the dress dance too.

The crew comes in for the final time, and this time there isn’t a clever flowing and clipping. With two buttons, half the dress falls off, revealing the bodysuit I felt underneath. It’s more skin than fabric, and I realize that this is the final transition: eveningwear into lingerie.

I lose my momentum for just a second. Do I want to be in front of half of New York in my underwear? The answer comes immediately and unexpectedly. Yes. Striking a new pose, I raise my arms above my head and lean into it, using poses that push the line between fashion and something too sexy for the Flatiron building on a sunny afternoon. I find Andrew again, but this time he’s not outside. He’s standing in the doorway of the gallery. The encouraging smile he’s worn this whole time is gone, replaced with a look of intensity and sheer heat.

The curtains drop and the crew comes to help me down. Suddenly I realize how exhausted I am. My feet are aching from hours in high heels and I’m sweating. I

didn't feel any of it until this moment. Someone from the crew hands me a water bottle, and another one a robe. They pull me down the hallway, I assume to get me out of hair and make-up, but Andrew stops them. "I'd like a moment alone with Delia, please."

No one even questions, just subtly disappearing and leaving the two of us alone. But not even that is enough, because he pulls me into another tiny room across from the dressing room. It's cluttered with random electronics and paraphernalia for the gallery, and there's barely room for the two of us to stand together, but we do.

He towers over me, and I can feel the heat coming off his body in the small space. "That," he says, "was everything I hoped for."

"I'm glad you liked it," I say, breathless at how close he is after hours of being drunk on the feeling of his gaze. I want to reach out and touch him, and he's so close that I'm can barely stop myself from reaching out.

"I want you," he says, and my breath catches. "I want you to work for me."

Stupid, Delia. Of course he wants you to work. This was a job, not an audition for which model is going to fall into his bed. On the heels of disappointment comes a wave of happiness. He wants me to work. I can pay my bills and not have to worry about being evicted! "I'd like that."

"I want to know if you can handle it," he says, his voice sliding low. "I want to know that you'll do everything that I ask, because I haven't found a muse like you in a long time."

"A muse?" I smile. "I don't think I've ever been called someone's muse before."

"I want you to be mine," he says, inching just a little closer, and I suddenly find it

hard to breathe. “I want you to say yes, not only for me, but because it will help you too.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh? How so?”

“The things I’ll ask you to do won’t always be easy. And a lot of them will push your limits. But they’ll also help you become more. I told you, you have that fire in you, and I want to help you make the world burn brighter with it.”

I laugh a little, his passion at once arousing and unnerving me. “You come on a little strong, Mr. Xellum.”

“Yes, I do,” he says, his expression not changing. “And I always will. I know what I want and I never compromise, which is why I need to know if you’re able to handle it.”

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“I think you’ll be surprised at what I’m able to handle,” I say, giving him a sly smile. “I accept.”

“Perfect,” he says, straightening. “I’ll tell May and she’ll handle the details.”

He opens the door and strides out, just like yesterday, leaving me gaping and turned on in his wake. The man certainly has a flare for dramatic and abrupt exits. Damn.

I lean against the wall, my energy evaporating, but I’m smiling. I have a job and the hottest boss in the world.

4

“Girl,” Fleece says the second I walk into the Blind Scorpion, “I’ve already seen it on YouTube. I wish I could have been there. You looked like a badass.”

I laugh and practically collapse on my chair. Before I even came over here I dropped off the rent check to Joe. So not only am I exhausted, I’m relieved, which just makes me that much more tired. “Which look did you see? You can’t have watched a three-hour show on YouTube.”

She gives me a look that makes me blush. “You know which one. The only look that anyone is going to be talking about. The last one, obviously.”

“Yeah,” I say, blushing. Looking back now, I can’t believe that felt so natural. I’m embarrassed just thinking about it. “I honestly don’t even know how I did it.”

Fleece rolls her eyes. “You know that I’ve known you for ten years and I know instantly when you’re lying, right?”

“Ugh. Fine,” I say. “But give me a drink first.” She passes me another one of her concoctions—I’ve learned not to ask what’s in them anymore. “It was him.”

“What do you mean?”

I sigh. “I mean, it was him. Andrew Xellum. Have you seen him?”

Fleece rolls her eyes. “Of course I’ve seen him. He’s so gorgeous it’s just unfair. But I’m still not sure what he has to do with your performance other than hiring you?”

“I mean, I thought I was going to vomit, but then I saw him watching me and the whole performance suddenly made sense. Like thinking of him as the audience was what I needed to make myself cut loose. It’s hard to explain.” I take a deep sip of my drink. “But the best part is that he wants to give me more work. So I really owe you one for making me go.”

Fully expecting her to be overjoyed, I’m surprised when her face is wary. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I didn’t say anything because you really needed the work, but I’ve heard things about him. I’ve heard that he’s a bit cold and demanding and he can be hard to work for. There are rumors about why his last favorite quit. I don’t know, maybe he did something that was over the line.”

“You could have said something last night if you didn’t think it was a good idea.”

She sighs. “Why would I do that? You’re broke and about to be living in my apartment. You needed the money. I’m just saying to be careful. Things can be too good to be true.”

“I will admit that he’s really intense,” I say, remembering our conversation in the little closet, “but I’m going to give it a shot. I’m not signing a contract with him or anything so it’s not like I can’t walk away if I need to. Plus, so far he hasn’t done anything I wouldn’t expect from a highly driven man who works in fashion.”

Fleece chokes on a laugh and I follow suit. “Well,” she says, “I’m happy you have work. Free drinks all night in celebration.”

“Barbara is going to kill you,” I say, raising my eyebrows.

She nods to someone trying to get her attention down the bar. “Barbara better worship the fucking ground I walk on after all I’ve done for her this week. I think I’ll risk giving my best friend a few celebratory drinks.”

She hurries away, and I turn in my chair and lean back against the wall. During the exhibition I felt like I had nothing but energy. Now I feel like I could crawl into bed and sleep for a week. But at least I’ll be able to do that with money in my bank account. That’s a new feeling.

I’m zoning out, almost ready to bail and go home to sleep, when Fleece makes her way back over to me. “By the way, you know you’re basically going to be a celebrity now, right?”



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Laughing, I roll my eyes. “That’s ridiculous.”

She shakes her head, “I know you’re new to this, but in the fashion world, Xellum Studios is it. Even though his stuff is really out there when he does shows, his designs are gorgeous and everyone loves them. He’s a huge deal.”

“I’m guessing you also didn’t tell me this so I wouldn’t freak out.”

“Maybe,” she grins. “I’m guessing you haven’t checked your social media pages today, have you?”

“No.” I grab my phone up the bar and open Twitter. I’ve always been a lurker on Twitter; following my favorite celebrities and friends. The only followers I had were my handful of friends. Tonight, I have over four thousand followers. The sight nearly makes me spit out my drink. “What the fuck? How did they even find me?”

“Welcome to the age of the internet. That transformation video is already going viral. You’ll have way more followers in the morning. Check your Instagram.”

I do, and there’s an even bigger jump. 6000 followers. “This is insane.”

“Absolutely, but use it. The more popular you are, the more money they’ll have to pay you,” she says with a wink.

There are no words for this, so I just take a sip of my drink.

“Oh,” she continues, “you may want to update those profiles to say who you are. Not

just ‘retail associate,’ since you’re clearly not that anymore.”

“Right.”

I feel a little dizzy. If I had known this would change my life completely, would I have done it? Am I going to regret it later? Right now I don’t, but who knows in the future.

“I know that look,” says Fleece. “You’re starting to second guess yourself.”

“What if you’re right?” I ask her. “What if it is a bad idea?”

She shakes her head. “It was stupid of me to even bring that up. It’s not a bad idea. You’re going to make more money than you’ve ever made in your life and work with one of the most talented designers on the planet. Don’t worry, I’m going to be right here while you do it. Now drink your damn drink while I make you another one.”

I raise my glass. “Yes, ma’am.”

5

Walking in to this art gallery was the closest thing I’ve ever really felt to being a celebrity, and I’m not sure how I feel about it. Sure, my social media accounts have blown up in the past couple of weeks, but people still don’t recognize me on the street. But the crowd waiting to get into the gallery where Andrew and his friend Heather are putting on a collaborative show? Those people know me. They’re asking for autographs and taking pictures and I feel anxiety rising up in my chest when May and a giant security guard fish me from the crowd and drag me inside.

“Do you ever get used to that sort of thing?”

She grins. “Never.”

“Perfect.” I supposed I’ll have to get used to it if I want to keep doing this though, and for now, I want to. So I have to suck it up and deal, even though the thought of any of those people just coming to see me makes me kind of want to pass out.

She starts walking towards the back of the gallery. “This way to hair and make-up.”

I look around as we cross the gallery. There’s definitely an aquatic theme going on with the art and the lights, everything drenched in teal and blue. Unlike the last exhibition, which was for an already existing Xellum line, both the art and Andrew’s new line of bathing suits are debuting tonight. I’m not the only model this time—which is a relief—but I still think he has something special planned.

Over the past couple of weeks, I’ve been down to his studio so they could take measurements of my entire body. Now that I’m working with him, they’ll make the designs to fit me. Even though I don’t get to keep them, it feels amazing putting on clothes I know are going to fit perfectly. I’ve only seen Andrew in passing, but the spark between us is there. I can feel it.

Walking into the back room, he’s there. He smiles when he sees me, but it’s a professional smile, not at all like the sultry little ones I catch him sending my way. “I’m glad you’re here. Your make-up is the most complicated, and we need to get started, plus I want to see the final look. Trish,” he calls over his shoulder as he guides me to a chair.

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The same make-up artist from last time comes over smiling. Andrew points to my cheekbones. “Masque make-up, heavy blues and greens, think mermaid. Lips need to match. Hair loose and as smooth as you can possibly get it.”

I look up at him. “A ‘hello’ would be nice.”

He stops for a second, “Hello. Find me as soon as you’re finished. We have a lot to do.”

“Wow,” I say quietly as he hurries away.

Trish laughs softly, “Don’t take it personally. That’s just how he is, especially on show days. He’s got a lot on his mind and he knows what he wants.”

We fall into conversation while she does my make-up, and I find myself relaxing. Trish has a very musical voice and it’s nice to hear her speak. It’s also nice to get a little more insight into the mysterious Mr. Xellum. I like hearing stories about him, like the time he got drunk and thought that lime green disco pants were a good idea, or how he made sure that a sick seamstress got all the rest she needed even though it was fashion week. Sure, she tells me, he’s a hard ass, and he errs on the cold side, but he’s a good guy.

When she’s finished and I look in the mirror, I don’t even recognize myself. I’m a sea creature come to life, my face patterned with gentle ripples and a blend of colors so seamless you would never know it’s not my skin. My hair is shiny, and seems darker than normal as it catches the light. “I think you’re a miracle worker.”

Trish laughs, “If I were a miracle worker I’d be able to make everyone’s wrinkles and grays go away.”

“Okay, temporary miracle worker then.”

“That, I’ll take. But you may not think I’m such a miracle worker when you have to wash it off later.”

I give her a wink. “I’ll be sure to curse your name plenty.”

Hopping out of the chair, I go to find Andrew. I find him at another model’s station, directing what he wants her look to be. I wait until he’s finished and sees me. He gives me a once-over and nods, gesturing for me to follow. I do, and he pulls a swimsuit off the rack. It looks complicated and gorgeous even on the hanger. With it is a sheer robe in colors that match my make-up. “This is yours for tonight. Let me see it, I want to make sure it’s perfect.” Then he leans in suddenly, and I’m overwhelmed by his sudden closeness. “You’re the centerpiece.”

And then he’s backed away like nothing’s happened. My heart is thundering, and I scold it. I can’t get worked up every time he pays me any kind of attention. But he is paying attention. Even though he’s professional, I can see the way he’s looking at me. My body reacts to it in a way it never has with anyone else.

“Hurry,” he says, “I still need to show you your choreography.”

“Choreography?”

He smirks. “Something like that.”

I duck behind the screen and pull on the bathing suit. It’s a one-piece, but it’s so scandalous that it might as well be two. The fabric is woven in tight knots that form

patterns over my skin. Some places are webbed with lace and sheer gauze, others are open to my skin. One strap is intentionally off the shoulder, and the colors are the same deep blue and teal that seem to be the theme. I put the robe on over the bathing suit, and I have to admit, it really works. I look like some sort of wanton mermaid or siren, ready to call to sailors and wreck their ships. With my make-up and hair, I look like someone who would do it with delight.

Coming out from behind the screen, I see that Andrew has walked a little ways away and is consulting with someone dressed in black who has a headset in his ear. They're looking at a clipboard, and the headset guy seems really animated. Again, I wait. Trish was right, Andrew has about a million things to deal with at the moment.

But then he turns and looks at me, and he freezes. The air between us goes tight, and I can feel the magnetic pull between us like it's a physical thing. I do feel like a siren, and I will him to come to me. He does.

"You look absolutely perfect," he says.

"Thank you," I say softly, grateful that my face is covered in paint and he can't see the fiery blush now gracing my cheeks. I have to look away from him. "That's nice of you."

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He shakes his head. "I know we don't know each other well, but I never say anything I don't mean. And I don't think I've ever said that to someone before." I lock eyes with him again and it feels like an electric eternity. He turns away quickly, breaking the moment. "Come with me."

I follow him into the main gallery, and I practically blend into it between the lights and the artwork. In the center of the room there's a low, oval platform. The lights play across the platform with a texture that makes it look like it's underwater. "You will be here," he says. "Lay down."

I raise an eyebrow, but I do. Then he's kneeling next to me, positioning me. "Start like this." He pulls my arms above my head, and the way his skin feels on mine is electric. Fingers brush my knee. "One up." If I'm not mistaken, his breath is a little short. Then his hand slides under my back and brushes my skin. "Arch as high as you can."

The position stretches the suit, and I can feel that I'm inches away from being indecent, but I also feel sexy. Andrew is leaning over me, looking down, and I see him glance at my lips. Oh god, I want him to kiss me even though I shouldn't. I want to pull him down on top of me right here in the middle of the gallery. Focus, Delia. "You mentioned choreography?"

"I did," he leans closer, and I can smell the subtle, spicy cologne on his skin. I let my back sink back to the floor as he stares at me. "The choreography is simply this: ecstasy."

"Like the drug?"

He laughs, and it echoes through the room. “No. Like sex. All of the models will be moving in slow motion, like they’re underwater. You just happen to be having the best orgasm of your life while you’re down there.”

I laugh softly. “So I am a siren. I wondered.”

“You certainly are.” I can tell he’s not joking.

Meeting his eyes, I arch my back again. “If I am, is it working? Because I can think of a few things that would get me in the mood to pretend I’m having the best sex of my life.”

Andrew’s eyes go dark, and his hand drifts down my waist grazing skin and fabric. Just as he reaches my hip, he pulls away suddenly, like he remembered where he was. He meets my gaze again. “Nothing is too far,” he says. “As long as it’s slow. If you want to touch yourself do it, if you want to moan, make whoever’s watching you feel your pleasure.”

I take a long, slow breath, making sure he takes note of the way my chest rises towards him. “Will you be watching?”

He’s silent for a long moment, and then. “I don’t think I could ever look away.”

6

It’s another thirty minutes before the gallery opens, and I spend that time trying not to ruin my make-up, and trying to go through in my head just how I’m going to pretend to have sex and orgasms for as long as this gallery is open. I keep seeing Andrew rush around, seeing to last minute details, and every time I do, I feel his hand run down my skin. I love the fact that he forgot himself, that I could make him do that. I want to see him forget himself a little more.



Five minutes before the doors open, I'm lying on the little platform. All around me are other models. Some are standing in the middle of the gallery, others are slouched against the wall by some of the gorgeous paintings. But Andrew didn't lie—I'm clearly in the center of it.

Andrew and a woman who I assume must be Heather walk toward the front doors, and May snaps all of us to attention. I put myself in the position Andrew chose, arching my back to the point of pain as I hear the outside doors open and the waiting crowd starts to enter. It's a launch, so the people invited are all from the fashion world. There won't be just anybody walking in who thinks they can touch the models. That's a relief.

I hear the gasps from the crowd as they walk into the room. It is a beautiful sight. And as the music starts to flow, I start to move. It's awkward, trying to move my body in slow motion, and how on earth am I supposed to pretend that I'm having sex?

A person pauses beside me, and I feel myself blush. This is ridiculous. Someone is watching me writhe on the floor. I don't know why I thought that this wouldn't be humiliating. I know my movements are awkward and jerky. Not what Andrew wants. Not what he described, and I feel the heat in my cheeks grow. Thank god I'm painted blue and no one will notice what a red mess I am at the moment.

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Slowly turning my head, I look toward the door. Andrew is there greeting people, but as if I called his name, he looks right at me. That pull between us snaps into place, and I feel it. I feel how to move. I imagine that the arch in my body is arching up into him. That the way I spread my legs and close my eyes is so that he can taste me. Slowly, slowly, I let my mind linger on images of his tongue inside me, fingers gripping my thighs until they shake and I'm moaning his name. A real moan comes from my throat and I bite my lip. He said nothing was too far, but that moan is just for him. I don't want to share it with the rest of the audience.

And audience there is. They mill around, watching the performances and commenting on the clothing and art. I hear Andrew's voice weaving through the crowd, talking and selling and making small talk. I focus on the sound when I can't see him, let that voice weave through my head so I can feel that hand on my skin again. Imagine that he's sliding inside me. That his head has dropped close enough to mine to kiss me while he plunges deep inside, taking me slowly until I'm screaming. I shiver, the images too real.

God, I'm aroused right now. The temptation to reach down and touch myself is so strong, but I don't. Because it's all for him. I'll give this audience what they want. I'll give them a siren's ecstasy, but my pleasure, that's all mine.

I feel it when he comes and stands next to the platform. I'm blinded by the lights above me but I know that it's him. I put every ounce of passion that I've been imagining into my face, into the way my body strains in the slow motion. The way I subtly reach for him.

It's a long time before he moves on, and I wish I could have seen his expression. Or

maybe I don't. If it's not what I hope, then maybe I don't want to know.

When the last person has left the gallery, I collapse in a heap on the platform. Every muscle in my body hurts and the pent up sexual energy I have has me craving sex or chocolate. Okay, really only sex, but since I don't think it's an option, I'll settle for chocolate.

I grab some water and change into the clothes I brought with me. No chance I'm getting this make-up off until I get in the shower, so I don't even try. But I need to see Andrew. I need to at least ask him what he thought, and see if I can tell if he can feel what I'm feeling. It's impossible that he didn't, right?

I spot him across the room, and head towards him where he's in conversation with someone. He spots me coming and excuses himself before I get there, and I arrive where he was standing just as he's disappearing around the corner. I follow him into the main room of the gallery where he's speaking to May. Again he sees me coming and leaves. This time I don't follow. It stings after what happened before the show. After what I felt was obvious between us.

May approaches me. "He doesn't."

"What?"

"He doesn't anything with people who work for him. No matter what he feels, he is a professional first. So if you're looking for that from him, don't expect it."

I shake my head. "I wasn't." It comes out too defensive, and I know it. "I mostly wanted feedback on my performance, but he seems to be avoiding me."

She smiles kindly at me. "He thought your performance was lovely. I'm sure he'll tell you himself when you see him next. He's just left to go home."

“Oh, okay.” I try to ignore the stab of disappointment in my chest. “Thanks, May.”

“He’ll have something more for you soon, so I’ll be in touch after the weekend, all right?”

“Sure.”

On the way home I find the biggest chocolate bar I can find, and even that isn’t enough. But it isn’t like we even know each other that well. He’s my boss. We’ve never dated; there are no promises. Do I really have a right to get upset with someone over something they never offered? No. But it sucks all the same and I’m going to make sure I get some action, even if it’s solo. When I get home I relive the evening, this time with a vibrator. I recreate those phantom images of Andrew making me come, of him fucking me until there’s too much pleasure, and I don’t stop until I’m exhausted and tumble into sleep.

Videos of my ecstasy performance are all over the internet, and even I have to admit that it looks amazing. From the outside, the entire cast of models looks like slow-moving otherworldly creatures. And even though it's sexy, it doesn't look like we're all imagining orgasms. I was afraid that it would look the way it felt, and the way it felt is not exactly something that I want on the internet. Even though the way it felt has provided more than enough inspiration to fill my orgasm quota.

It's only been a few days since the event, and every muscle in my body still aches from the strain. I'm glad that I haven't heard from May yet. As much as I like this job, and the absurdly large direct deposit that came right after the show, if everything I do for Andrew is going to be that intense, I'm going to need to rest my body.

Knocking on the door of the Blind Scorpion, Fleece appears to let me in. "I swear that you live here now," I tell her. The bar is closed since it's only noon.

"I swear, I feel like it lately."

"When is Barbara coming back?"

A loud voice calls from the storeroom. "I'm here. Don't worry, I'm not dead yet."

Fleece rolls her eyes. "Of course not."

Barbara sweeps out of the back room in all her glory. A woman in her sixties whose very essence screams 'New York.' She's carrying a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of

vodka to replenish the stock behind the bar. “How you doin,’ Delia?”

“Good. Feeling better?”

“Oh, you know,” she grins, “five days of pulling my guts up. Will teach me to eat street tacos with a cold. It’s a deadly combination.”

I laugh even though that sounds awful. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

My phone chimes and I pull it out to see a text message from May. An invitation. “Hey,” I say to Fleece, and toss her the phone. “Want to go?”

She reads the message out loud: “Delia, Mr. Xellum wanted me to extend an invitation for you and whoever you’d like to bring to the Whitman & Crown party tonight. It is, in part, a celebration of them picking up the new swimsuit line. Let me know if you’d like to attend and any guests. If you stop by the studio beforehand, we’ll provide styling as well.” She looks at me, her mouth open. “This is one of the biggest parties of the year.”

“You should go,” Barbara says from behind the bar. “Lord knows you’ve earned a night off.”

“Sure you’ll be okay?”

The look on Barbara’s face is priceless. “Baby, I’ve been runnin’ this bar by myself since before you could walk. Of course I’ll be okay. Go have fun.”

Fleece tosses me back the phone, and there’s a sparkle in her eye that from experience I know means trouble. “Looks like we’re going to a party.”

Styling is an understatement. Fleece and I are made over from head to toe, and Fleece

gets a choice of gowns to wear. I, on the other hand, had something left for me. There's a note pinned to the neckline of the dress. It just has a few words.

The whole damn fire.

The dress itself is stunning. Exactly the same gauzy cut as the one I walked in in for my first audition, this one is all flame. The top is a deep maroon that fades into orange, red, white, and the deepest blue as it falls into the skirt. I remember the way this dress works, and I take off everything, so it's just me and the dress. The back swoops low, and this version of the dress feels even better than the first one did.

Andrew must have spoken to Trish before he left because the make-up and hair perfectly complements the look, turning my eyes smoky and dark, and sweeping my hair back into a messy low knot. A pair of bright red heels completes the look. And looking in the mirror, I do look like the whole damn fire.

Fleece whistles when she sees me. "Damn, girl."

I fight to suppress a giggle. "I guess it pays to be someone's muse?"

"I'll say."

Fleece has chosen a daring green dress with a skirt that splits nearly to her hip, and sleeves that drape gracefully off her shoulders. She looks magical. I'm about to tell her so when May pops her head in. "Your car is here, ladies."

“We have a car?”

“Of course,” she says. “We can’t have you showing up in Mr. Xellum’s designs walking from the subway or in a yellow cab.”

It seems almost strange, how my life has changed in less than a month. I was broke and about to be evicted, and now I’m working for one of the most famous designers in the world. “This is crazy.”

“A little,” May says, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she smiles. “But a good kind of crazy, I hope.”

“Definitely,” Fleece says, grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the door.

I twist around to wave. “See you later, May!”

We pile into the big black car waiting outside, breathless and giggling. I feel like Cinderella going to the ball, only better because I know that this won’t evaporate at midnight.

“So,” Fleece says, giving me a look. “What are you going to do tonight?”

“I’m going to drink and dance, but I’m assuming from that look that’s not what you’re talking about?”

She shakes her head. “No. I mean about Andrew.” She mouths the last two words.



I shrug, swimming in my own imagined fantasies and trying to resist the sting of disappointment that they won't become real. "What can I do? He doesn't want me that way."

Fleece snorts. "My ass. He dressed you like that."

"I have to be dressed well," I say, "he knows people will be watching me because of the shows." I lower my breath so that the driver can't hear. "I practically threw myself at him during the last show, and afterwards he avoided me. So clearly, that is going to be that."

The look on her face says that she still doesn't believe me, but she doesn't argue. The car pulls up to a gorgeous building in midtown, and there's a huge crowd of people outside. Along with a real-life red carpet. "Oh shit."

"You didn't realize this would be part of it, did you?" Fleece is trying to hold in her laughter.

"Don't mock me," I say, even though I'm smiling.

She grabs my hand. "I would never. But you are adorable. Just a few poses and they'll let you go. Come on."

The flashes when I exit the car are blinding. Shouts of my name and questions that range from the most innocent of 'what's your favorite color?' to racier things like 'do you like to be on top?' echo around me as I walk toward the entrance. I follow Fleece as she breezes down the carpet, and follow her lead. I stop, pose for the cameras, even though I don't really have a clue what I'm doing. For the hundredth time in the last month, I ask myself what the hell I'm doing here. The photographers seem happy though, so I must be doing something right.

It takes longer than I expect to make it all the way down the carpet, but I do, and Fleece is waiting for me. She loops her arm through mine, and together we walk into what I think must be a wonderland.

8

Never in my life have I seen anything like this. There's not one theme, there's ten, or so it seems. The only thing that connects everything is 'excess.' In the main room, fabric cascades from the walls like a circus tent and aerialists swirl above our heads. Lights pulse and the bass of music thrums through my chest. Another room looks like it landed from the future, metal and chrome and what seems like a thousand computer screens playing different music videos and fashion ads. Everywhere I look there's glitz and glitter, drinks, and people in gorgeous clothes. It's more than overwhelming.

Fleece, however, is totally in her element. She's chatting with people she knows, model friends and people she's met on jobs. It's really too bad that Andrew generally doesn't hire models with her look because this feels like it was meant for her, not me.

A hand lands gently on my shoulder and I jump, turning to find Andrew behind me. "Mr. Xellum," I say. Damn. He looks hot all the time, but just the sight sends a thrill through my body. He's wearing an absolutely incredible suit, dark fabric with a sheen of color that seems to match the fiery colors in my dress, though the lights make it hard to tell. His shirt is definitely the same dark maroon, and I realize he's the dark flame to my bright one. The shadow behind it. It's a perfect statement for designer and muse, and I wonder who here will notice. The suit shows off his body perfectly, broad shoulders and trim waist. God, I want to see what's underneath that fabric.

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The lights highlight the planes of his face, making him more angular. Striking. I'm suddenly finding it hard to breathe, and realize that I'm just standing there staring.

He smiles, and it's not that little one that he seems to always be wearing. This one is genuine. "You can call me Andrew," he says. "We're going to be working together enough. Besides, Mr. Xellum feels too formal."

I smile back at him, "Okay, Andrew." At least now I don't have to keep biting my tongue before saying his name. "Thank you for the dress."

"You don't have to thank me. Dressing you is a pleasure." I blush, and look away, but he reaches out to stop me. "That embarrasses you?"

"Not really...I'm just not used to people saying things like that to me."

Andrew grabs a drink off a passing waiter's tray and presses it into my hand. "You should be. You're beautiful, and more than that you're smart and talented. People should be making a big deal out of you."

"Thank you," I say, blushing. "For what it's worth, I've really enjoyed working with you. It's strange, and I'm not sure how good I am at yet, but it's better than I ever expected."

"Well," Andrew says, "I'm glad. It's been awhile since working with someone has felt this...natural, so I know what you mean."

"Tell me something about you," I say spontaneously. "Something that has nothing to

do with fashion.”

His voice is deadpan. “I’m allergic to peanuts.”

“I’m serious,” I say. “I feel like you know everything about me, but you’re still this mysterious handsome fashion mogul.”

A raised eyebrow. “Handsome.”

“Of course that’s what you would pick up on,” I roll my eyes.

“Something that has nothing to do with fashion,” he says, like he’s rolling the question over in his mind. “I love to travel.” His voice is as soft as it can be in this party and still have me hear him. “And not the kind of ‘let’s fly on a first class jet and go on red carpets’ travel that people probably think of when they think of me. I like to walk. Take trains. Find hidden little places off the beaten path that make for a good story later. I never get to do that now.”

A small smile creeps up on my face, “That was perfect. But why don’t you get to go? If you want to, do it.”

“Honestly, it just seems like I never have the time. There’s one opportunity and then the next and everyone is asking for more. Before you know it, a year goes by.”

I reach out and touch his hand on instinct, and I get a jolt of electricity from his skin. “If you want to go, you should make the time.”

“You’re right,” he says. “I should.”

He’s leans closer, and I know it’s so that we can hear each other in the crowded room, but my heart rate speeds up, and my body remembers the pleasure I’ve given it

while imagining him. Muscle memory is a thing. Is pleasure memory a thing, because the way I'm wet between my legs seems to say that it is.

"And for the record," he says, "I don't know everything about you, but I'm very excited to learn." My breath catches as he continues. "Your turn to tell me something."

"I don't have anything glamorous like that."

Andrew chuckles. "It doesn't have to be glamorous."

I shake my head, words barely coming.

"I just never thought this would be me," I say. "I never wanted to be a model. A month ago I worked in a department store."

His mouth curls up into a half-smile. "What did you want to be, then?"

"I hadn't really figured it out yet."

Andrew puts a finger under my chin and lifts it so that our eyes meet. "When we first met I told you I liked honesty. But what you just told me isn't the truth. What's the truth?"

A flash of pain and memory go through me, but I plaster on a smile. "It's not a story for a party like this. And I'm sure you'll hear it some day since we're going to be working together."

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He searches my eyes, and I'm not sure what he's looking for, but he seems to find it. He drops his hand from my chin to my shoulder, his thumb tracing absent circles on my skin. I take a deep breath, trying to control my heart and I get a hint of cologne that only makes things worse. What is he doing to me?

I've had a handful of boyfriends and one-night-stands in my life, but nothing has ever affected me as viscerally as Andrew's looks or touches. This is only a touch on the shoulder. What on earth would happen if that hand went elsewhere? I shudder, and his thumb stops moving. He's looking at me, and that hungry look from the audition is back. "Dance with me," I breathe. It's barely loud enough for him to hear over the music, but he does. I can see the words surprise him.

He's opening his mouth to answer me when a loud, drunken shout comes from behind him. "Xellum! My man, how are you?"

Just like that the spell is broken and whatever moment we were trapped in together is gone. Andrew's hand drops from my skin, and I feel it's echo like a brand. It's probably for the best. He was probably about to say no, that he can't dance with me, that we can't do this. I'd rather be interrupted than actually hear him say that.

I knock back the champagne he handed me, and walk away while his back is turned, talking to the man who called his name. I find Fleece at the bar near the dance floor, already buzzed and giggly with another model friend of hers. She throws her arms around me as I appear. "Delia! My friend. The woman of the hour!" She raises her glass. "I love you, you know that?"

I laugh. "How much have you had already?"

“Just a couple, but they make good drinks here. I would know.”

“Yes, you would,” I say, grabbing what’s left of her drink and finishing it. “Want to dance it off with me?”

She jumps up off her stool and nearly trips. “I’ll dance it off and then I’ll have more!”

I pull her with me through the party into a room that looks like it’s entirely made of stars and is the center of the dancing. “I’m certainly not going to tell a bartender how much she can drink.”

“Damn right!” Fleece raises her hands above her head and lets the music take her, and I follow suit. The lights and the music, it’s all perfect. I dance with Fleece as the alcohol starts to go to my head and I feel really good. I really didn’t think that this would be my life, but right now I’m not complaining. I spin around with Fleece, arm in arm, laughing as we dance. I can’t remember the last time I felt this carefree.

The song changes to something just a little slower, the beat moves through the room and makes it seem a little darker. A handsome man takes Fleece’s hand and then they’re dancing together, moving together like they’re one. Fleece has always been a good dancer.

I dance on my own, I don’t need to be swept off my feet or attached at the hip to have a good time at this party. A hand touches the small of my back, and I turn to decline the dance when my mouth goes dry. It’s Andrew. “I believe,” he says, “that we were interrupted.”

I let him pull me closer, so our bodies are pressed together as he leads. “We were,” I say. “But I thought you were going to say no.”

“Why would you think that?” His hand strokes his hand down my back, fingers

resting right where the fabric meets my skin, so close to skimming under my dress. That same arousal I felt earlier roars back to life, and I press closer to him, doing some roaming of my own. I can feel the body that his clothes are hiding, and just the thought of what it might look like has my mouth watering.

Andrew Xellum is notoriously private when it comes to his own life. I couldn't find any shirtless pictures of him anywhere, and believe me, I tried. But what I feel beneath his shirt, and what I can feel growing hard in his pants, would be well worth waiting for. His hand strokes down my back again and I get goosebumps. "You avoided me after the last show," I say. "And I heard that you don't do this with people who work for you."

He moves us in circles with the music, hips locked together as we move. It's so dark in here—the lights having faded to nothing but the starry backdrop—that I can barely see anyone else. It feels like we're alone.



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“We haven’t done anything yet,” he says, fingers teasing that line of fabric. I’m very aware that I have nothing on underneath it. I wonder now if that was intentional.

Tilting my face up towards his, I try to see his face in the dim light as he spins us together. “Yet?”

I say it like it’s a joke, and yet I know I have way too much riding on his answer. He doesn’t brush it off, and doesn’t laugh. He meets my eyes, that fiery heat rising through me as he stares. “Yet.”

The music changes again, faster and more urgent. I dare to ask the question, “Would you like to do something?”

Andrew spins me so my back is pressed against his chest, his arms holding me against him while we dance, hips and bodies in time with the music, and now his lips are at my ear. “You have no idea the kind of things I want to do.”

He slips his hand in the side of my dress, and I gasp. Blood rushes to my face as his hand strokes across my stomach, lifts to cup my breasts. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since that night. You were absolutely everything, and it took everything in me not to fuck you right there in the middle of that gallery.”

“I would have let you,” I moan.

His chuckle makes me shiver. “I know. That’s why I had to leave. I couldn’t do it. I knew I wouldn’t be able to control myself if I were near you.”

His hand drops, teasing a little bit lower. “What changed?” I manage to ask. I can’t even think while his hands are on me.

“I’m tired of fighting it.”

I try to laugh, but it comes out as a moan. “Thank god.”

Andrew’s voice drops even lower. “I saw you that night. I saw how everything turned you on. You were in the middle of a room crowded with people and you didn’t care. You like to be watched.”

Heat rises to my cheeks and I shake my head. “No, not by everyone. Just you.”

“Is that so? Because I think you love it. I think that the idea of being caught with my hand inside your dress excites you.”

My eyes flutter closed, and I try to protest, but I can’t because he’s right. The idea that someone—anyone—in this crowd of dancers can see what he’s doing to me turns me on. “You’re already wet, aren’t you?” he whispers, not waiting for an answer he already knows. “You would have let me take you in the middle of that gallery. And now?”

I arch my back against him, “Please.” It comes out like a prayer, begging him to just give me this, even if there’s nothing else. I need to know what it feels like to have him touch me.

His hand slides further down my stomach, and I shudder. His hand is getting closer to where I want it, to where I need it. Andrew needs it too. I can feel how hard he is behind me, his hips pressing against my ass while we dance.

“You think I didn’t think about this when I gave you this dress to wear?” he asks,

voice in my ear. “Because I did.” His hand slips lower, fingers dipping between my legs, teasing and searching. I thought about what it might be like to touch you, to feel that fire.” A finger slips inside me, and I bite my lip to keep from moaning. I close my eyes and let my head fall back against his shoulder like I’m enjoying the dance. But god it’s so much more than that. His finger is deep inside me. Andrew strokes his thumb across my clit. His whole hand moves, pressing against me and into me again and again, and I’m so wet that it’s dripping down my legs. How many nights have I thought about this? How many times have I done exactly what his hand is doing and wishing it were him?

“I’ve never done anything like this,” I breathe.

“What?” I can hear the smirk in his voice. “Danced?”

“Yes I’ve danced...” He moves his hand and my words run dry. Pleasure ripples through my body, and I can’t even take a breath. “I’ve never...”

He smiles against my skin, “Come in the middle of a crowded room.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

Andrew laughs, dark and sensual, “Oh, yes you are. And you’re going to fucking love it.” He slips a second finger inside me, and my knees buckle. The only thing keeping me standing is his arm around my waist and his fingers in my pussy. I’m not even dancing now, just standing pressed against Andrew, and no one has noticed. But they could. This dress is so thin not to see that his hand is inside it. Not to see the way his arm is moving, fucking me, grinding his palm against my clit.

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It's everything I wanted it to be. More. Pleasure coils in my gut, and spills over into my veins. I'm so close, I can feel it, and Andrew doesn't slow down. He pumps his fingers into me, curling them deeper, hitting my G-spot so I'm panting with every movement. "Oh god," I say, and I think I might scream with the mounting pleasure. If I scream everyone will know what's happening and I'm not sure if I want to hide or if I want everyone to see and oh god this feels so good I can't hold on.

Andrew growls in my ear. "Come. I want to feel you come on my hand. I want it dripping down your legs in the middle of all these people."

His words send me over the edge and my body goes rigid with the orgasm. Fiery pleasure rips its way through me, and I bite my cheek to keep my voice inside. He keeps fucking me, letting my orgasm pour over his hand and down my legs and onto the floor. My body is covered in tiny spasms and aftershocks, each one caused by the way he keeps teasing my pussy. A stroke, a brush across my clit.

I try to gain control of my breathing. "I think it's safe to say we've done something now."

He chuckles, his tone low and full of promise. "Want to do some more?"

9

We crash into the small room off the club together, and before the door is even closed, Andrew's mouth is on mine. I can feel him everywhere, his kiss running through my entire body, and even though he just gave me the best orgasm of my entire life, I want more.

“It’s my turn,” he says. “I’ve never done this before.”

It’s too easy. I smirk up at him, “What, sex?”

He laughs, loud in the small closet we’ve shoved ourselves into. “No, you were right before. I’ve never crossed this line with anyone that’s worked with me. I’ve never wanted to. But now...”

“Are you saying that I’m special?”

He presses me against the wall, his body on mine, and kisses me hard. I feel all that hunger pour into me in this kiss. “You’re more than special. You’re everything.”

This time I’m the one kissing him. I’m pulling at his suit because I want it off. I want him closer to me. I want all of him the way I’ve wanted him since that very first day. My hands find his belt, and I manage to get it undone while we’re still kissing. I reach inside his pants and feel him, hot and hard and long, and he groans into my mouth. “I want to see you,” I say. “All of you.”

“You will,” he promises as he rolls on a condom. “Later.”

He grabs the skirt of my dress and hikes it up around my waist, and then he’s lifting me and sliding in and oh god he’s so big and it feels so perfect. The rough cement of the club wall digs into my back as he starts to move inside me, strokes fast and desperate. He wants me just as much as I want him, and even though I want more of him, I need this. This release of everything that’s built up between us for the last month. Long looks and pretending to come and my endless nights with my vibrator.

The vibrator will never compare to the real thing.

I wrap my legs around his waist as he fucks me breathless. I can’t speak, I can’t

moan, only feel. The way he's stretching me open as he presses deeper into me, his face buried in my neck. He's never slept with one of his models before. I'm the first. The only one he's wanted like this.

The thought runs through me to the core, and the realization rockets through me, spiking my arousal even higher. He's risking his reputation to be with me, and he doesn't care.

Andrew's hands dig into my ass, pulling me against him as he thrusts, and his cock hits that spot deep inside me that sends off sparks and makes me see rainbows. He doesn't stop, pounding steadily into me, and I come again. This time I do cry out. I say his name and yes and please more, and he gives it to me, fucking me into the wall as he comes too.

Neither of us moves, frozen in the moment with each other, simply breathing. "I don't want to move," I say.

"I do and I don't," he says, giving me a smile. "I want to stay buried inside you forever, and I want to take you home and memorize your body with my mouth."

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My breath goes short and my fingers tighten on his shoulders. “I changed my mind,” I say. “Let’s do that.”

He chuckles. “Your friend won’t worry?”

“Are you kidding?” I roll my eyes. “She’ll throw us a fucking parade.”

He laughs, taking my hand and pulling me toward the back entrance.

Andrew’s apartment is predictably gorgeous. A downtown apartment overlooking the High Line with clean lines and a truly impressive number of windows. I can’t imagine how much it would cost to live here, but I’m going to enjoy it.

“Welcome,” Andrew says, ushering me inside. “Make yourself at home.”

Now that we’ve gotten the frenzy out of the way, there’s an ease between us. We’re going to fuck again, and I will make him keep that promise about his mouth, but there’s no rush now. We both know that we’ll get there.

He takes his jacket off and hangs it up, and steps into the kitchen. “Do you want something to drink?” he asks.

“Just water, thanks.” I peek my head into rooms, the apartment is spacious, and I have the urge to continue exploring until I poke my head into what is clearly his workspace. The entire room is covered in piles of fabric, swatches pinned to giant fabric boards on the walls. There are a couple of mannequins with finished designs and piles of sketches. It’s a huge contrast to what I’ve seen in his studio and the rest

of the apartment. The creative frenzy and mess doesn't even seem like him, yet here it is.

I wander closer to the pile of sketches and start to sift through them. It's the beginning of the fall collection. Chunky off-the-shoulder sweaters, gorgeous trousers and dresses you can wear with boots and leggings. That classic fall aesthetic crossed with his own individual flare.

Andrew appears at my shoulder with a glass of water. "Do you like them?"

"I really do, not that my opinion matters."

He turns me to face him. "Of course it matters. I hope that you'll be wearing them, so I want your opinion. Also," he says, giving me a stern look, "never sell yourself short. Your opinion should always matter. If it doesn't, you're in the wrong place."

I duck my head at the sudden burst of emotion that surges through me at those words. "We barely know each other; you can't know that."

Andrew pulls me away from the sketches and into his living room where he settles us on a short couch, close enough to touch, big enough that we're not crowded. "It might sound strange to say, but in fashion you learn to judge people quickly. People almost always reveal themselves with their clothes, even if they're not honest. I've been doing this a long time, and have learned what to look for in the people I want to know better. The people I want to spend time with." He smiles and it seems more relaxed than I've ever seen him. "All that to say that I saw who you were when you walked into that room, and I was blown away."

I blush again, and he laughs. "I like it when you blush, though it's funny that someone who has such a strong exhibitionist streak is so shy."



“I’m not an exhibitionist,” I say, shaking my head.

He raises an eyebrow. “I’d say our experiences together show that that’s not true.”

“But it’s not them, it’s you,” I blurt out. “I was a mess in the exhibition until I saw you, felt you watching. The same at the gallery. I had no idea what I was doing, and then you were there and suddenly...you being the audience made everything make sense. I don’t care if people see me—only if you see me.” My blush deepens and I’m suddenly afraid of that admission which seems too deep and intimate despite the fact that we just had sex.

He reaches out, fingers brushing along my skin to cup the back of my neck. “And what if I had decided that I did want to fuck you in the middle of that gallery, in front of anyone. How would you have felt?”

“At that point, I honestly don’t think I would have cared.”

Andrew pulls me closer, a wicked grin on his face. “And tonight at the club? You’re going to tell me that it was only me touching you that was turning you on? Not the fact that we could be caught—could be seen—at any moment?”

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I swallow, taking a breath. When I was close to coming I do remember those thoughts running through my head, that anyone could have seen his hand in my dress. I wanted them to see. “Oh my god,” I breathe.

Andrew chuckles and closes the distance between us to kiss me softly. “There’s nothing wrong with it. In case you haven’t noticed, I have a little flare for drama.” That makes me laugh. “And even though I would never let anyone touch you, I don’t mind if they watch.”

His hand slides up my thigh, under the fabric of the dress and higher. “In fact, I think you might like it.”

“I don’t know.”

His hands keep traveling upward and he lifts the dress over my head in one swift mention. “I bet I can convince you.”

My breath is shallow, heart pounding. “I have no doubt that you could.” I glance down as he runs his fingers between my breasts. “You’ve already seen almost all of me.”

“Seeing,” he says, smirk wicked, “and experiencing, are not the same thing. I believe the way I convinced you to leave the club was a certain promise involving my mouth. Another thing you should know about me—along with being honest, I always keep my promises.”

I let out a moan as his lips touch my neck, tongue exploring. He lays me back on the

couch and shows me just how thoroughly he plans to keep his promise. His mouth is everywhere: in the hollow of my throat and across my collarbone. Sucking on the skin of my breasts and teasing me until my nipples are harder than they've ever been. His tongue follows the line of my stomach and the curves of my hips, fingers following, almost tickling but not quite. Everything is sensation and I can't keep my eyes open as he works his way lower, past where I expect him to stop down to my thighs where he continues to explore.

I honestly never knew how sensitive thighs could be. His mouth kisses my legs open, nipping the skin and sending ripples to my already sensitive pussy. It's been a while since I've had sex, let alone multiple times in one night. His hands smooth over my hips, gently opening me further, and I hold my breath as I feel him move closer. But he's taking his time, moving around, a bite here and a soft lick there.

Finally, the barest touch of his tongue on my clit. I moan, back arching, I want more of him, all of him. He doesn't give it to me, he goes in slow motion, almost emulating my vision at the gallery. Every inch of my pussy is touched by him, and I can't even breathe. Sinking my hands into his hair, I pull him closer, showing him what I need. This time he obliges, moving faster, plunging his tongue deep inside me, moving across me in long strokes.

I'm so close that I'm panting his name, digging my fingers deep into his hair, lifting my hips to meet his mouth. Andrew's hands are hard on my hips as he holds me still, plunging deeper, and I can't hold on any longer. Pleasure explodes through me, and I cry out as I come. I'm shaking with the orgasm, unable to see or think in the cloud of sheer pleasure. There's nothing in the universe except for Andrew's mouth on me. It's too good. Better than I ever imagined it would be, and as I come down from the high, I can barely catch my breath.

"Shit," I say, and Andrew chuckles.

He crawls up my body, and I love the sight of him above me. “Did I keep my promise?”

“One of them,” I say, reaching for the buttons on his shirt. “You’ve seen all of me. I think it’s my turn.”

A mischievous light dances in his eyes, “What do you want? Do you want to undress me? Or do you want me to undress for you?”

I slide my hand down his chest, feeling the muscles underneath the fabric. “Show me,” I breathe.

Andrew takes time to kiss me first, so deep that I’m lightheaded before he stands, his hands going to the buttons of his shirt. The smirk on his face is sexy as he undoes them, one by one, revealing a chest that could easily be in any fashion campaign. “Like what you see?”

I return his smirk. “Show me more.”

It is impossible that this is my life. With a playful smile on his face, Andrew undoes the buttons on his pants.

“Why aren’t you the model again?” He could model for any brand he wanted. Hell, he could be a nude model for art students and half the room would faint with desire. His pants fall, revealing slim hips complete with that V I find so sexy, and virtually perfect legs. Not to mention his cock, hard and thick, making my mouth go dry with the possibility of feeling that again.

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He raises an eyebrow. “People already think I’m arrogant enough. I don’t think that modeling my own clothes would help that any.”

I can’t say anything because I’m too busy memorizing him. He’s perfect and I’m so glad he crossed this line—missing this view would be a goddamn tragedy. He approaches me again, that playful smile reappearing. “Now do you like what you see?”

Reaching out to touch him, I watch the muscles in his stomach jump and the way his jaw clenches. I smirk. “It’ll do. I think I can work with this.”

“Oh really,” he says, grabbing my wrist and pulling me to my feet. “Well if you’re going to work with this, I don’t think the couch is the place to do it.”

He sweeps me off my feet, and laughter bubbles out of my chest as he carries me toward the bedroom.

10

I come awake slowly, to brightness. The walls in Andrew’s bedroom are entirely glass, electric privacy shades half drawn to allow the morning sun in. I stretch slowly, languorously, feeling the tension in my body after last night. Even the thought of that makes me smile. I’m not sure what time it is, but I’m definitely not running on much sleep. There was too much to do, too much pent up sexual tension that we worked out. Over and over. And then once more for good measure.

Rolling over in the bed, I find nothing but a mess of tangled sheets. I sit up slowly,

my body still feeling heavy. I didn't sleep much but I slept deeply. Probably the best sleep I've had since I started working for Andrew.

Footsteps echo in the hallway and I blink as Andrew walks in—still naked—with two steaming mugs. “Coffee?” He hands me one of the cups. I take a sip without looking and freeze. This coffee is perfect, with the exact amount of cream and sugar that I like. I glance up at him, and he smiles. “You thought I didn't notice how you take your coffee?”

I swallow. “It's not exactly something everyone notes.”

He puts his mug down and sits on the bed next to me. “I've noticed everything about you,” he says softly. “I notice the way you twist your fingers together when you're nervous, and the fact that you like to doodle hearts and cubes on papers when you're bored and distracted. It's every little thing that made me realize that I couldn't just be professional. I had to be with you.”

There's a fuzzy feeling in my chest as he leans in to kiss me, and I don't miss the way he makes sure to set my coffee aside before laying me back on the bed. The man can kiss. My body lights up with the way his lips press into mine. Our tongues are dancing and it reminds me of how talented he is with his tongue in other places, and suddenly I'm wet and ready again, even after last night.

“I thought we might test your shyness this morning,” he says against my lips.

“See,” I say, laughing. “You just said something so amazing and now you want to embarrass me.”

Andrew's eyes go dark and serious. “I don't want to embarrass you. I never want to embarrass you. But every new thing you try opens your possibilities. I don't just think it's me. Deep down, I think you like being watched. I think you like the idea of being

caught doing something you would never normally do.”

I feel a rush of wetness in my pussy and I realize that he’s right. I do want that. My cheeks go pink and I fight the feeling of embarrassment. “Maybe it means I’m a deviant. I’m not sure that’s a good thing.”

“Why not?” Andrew’s lips brush my neck. “Maybe it means you want people to see who really are. Maybe once you accept that you love it, you’ll realize how incredibly powerful you are. You don’t just love to be watched, but because of that, you have the ability to make people watch you.” His mouth is trailing down towards my breasts, and I’m having a hard time forming coherent thoughts. “I know the moment you walked into that room I couldn’t look away.”

I groan as his mouth closes over my nipple. Maybe he’s right, maybe I’ve always known and have fought it. Maybe I’ve always been embarrassed by the idea. Maybe I should own it. His teeth graze my skin making me gasp, and I arch into him. “What kind of test did you have in mind?”

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“Mmm,” he says, raising his face to look into my eyes, “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” The answer is instantaneous.

He grins. “Then close your eyes.”

I do, and he takes my hand. He leads me off the bed and through the apartment. I’m not familiar enough with it to know exactly where he guides me, and even though I could cheat, I don’t. I do trust him. He stops me, hands taking my hips and guiding me where he wants me to stand. He’s standing behind me, and I love the heat of his skin on mine. Fingers dip into my pussy, and I lean back against him just like at the club.

“So wet already,” he says. “We haven’t even gotten to the best part.”

“If it’s anything like last night, I’m looking forward to the best part,” I say breathlessly.

Andrew chuckles, and I hear the rip of a condom wrapper and moments later the head of his cock presses against me, easing in until I’m full of him. I moan because I’m still sensitive from all the attention he’s paid me in the last twelve hours and because it feels so damn good. He takes my hands in his and presses them against glass. His breath tickles my ear as he whispers, “Open your eyes.”

Downtown Manhattan is laid out in front of me, with a spectacular view of the High Line. People are walking, jogging, even a group of people doing Tai Chi on one of the lawns. Around us, there are other high rises, close enough to see in the windows. I



am utterly exposed, and my whole body has a rush of adrenaline and heat. God, he was right.

Andrew pulls out and thrusts in again. “Look at our reflection,” he says, his voice deep with lust. “Look at the way my cock is filling you up.” I can see the ghostly image reflected in the glass as he pushes into me, and I grow even wetter. “Any second,” he says, “those people can look up and see me fucking you. They can see the way I’m stretching your pretty pussy and making you scream.”

I try to laugh, planning on making a joke about the screaming, but I can’t. It’s too good. Andrew pushes me forward until I’m pinned between the glass and him, the coolness giving my skin goosebumps. “Any second, someone could see,” he says. “Do you like that?”

“God, yes.”

He chuckles. “I knew it.”

I don’t know what it is. Whether it’s the idea of someone seeing me so vulnerable or the thought that they might get turned on by watching me, imagining one of those people on the High Line looking up and seeing me fucked sends a piercing wave of arousal through me, straight to my clit, and I’m already on the edge of coming.

Andrew fucks me deeper, and I cry out. It’s like he knows exactly where to touch me because sex has never felt like this. Pleasure blooms inside my core and I go limp with it, held up by nothing but the window and Andrew’s cock. It’s a sweeping wave spiraling outward, washing over everything and making the world seem brighter. So. Good.

Andrew presses a kiss to my neck. “There wasn’t nearly enough screaming.”

“I’m not a screamer.”

“You will be,” he says, spinning me so my back is to the window.

I feel dizzy with my back to the world, like I could fall at any moment. Andrew doesn’t waste any time, instead of pushing back in, he drops to his knees, devouring me with his mouth. A second orgasm explodes through me, and my knees are on the verge of buckling. My breath is coming in huge, heaving gasps, but I don’t scream.

He smiles up at me with a wicked smile on his face. “Scream for me.”

“No,” I say, but I’m smiling back. I’m going to do my best, and so is he.

His mouth covers me again, lips closing over my clit and sucking deep. I swear I almost come again, those lips are magic. He teases me with his tongue, drawing circles and patterns, focused entirely on that little bundle of nerves. I’m so wet that he slides against me, but he drinks me in like he’s dying of thirst. I hold on until I can’t anymore, and I come, the pleasure pouring over me like a waterfall.

Andrew stands and spins me back to the window. “Let’s see if there’s anyone watching now.” He slams in to the hilt, and I bite my lip to hold back the scream I swore I wouldn’t give. His hands slide up my body as he fucks me, and every touch feels like it has echoes.

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I look down towards the High Line, and there is someone watching. The Tai Chi class is breaking up, and a man is standing, watching. Arousal washes through me like wildfire and I shudder. Andrew sees the man at the same time and laughs, knowing this is just turning me on even more. “Now you have your audience,” he whispers.

He thrusts in again, and I realize that this whole time he’s been holding back. This is so much more than what I’ve felt before, even just with him. I can’t think, can’t breathe. My fingers grab at the glass of the window in attempt to hold on to something, to anchor myself, but I can’t.

Every stroke brings me closer to my next orgasm, and it’s big. I can feel it building like I can see it from far away, and it grows. The man down below has pointed us out to some of his classmates and now several people are looking up, watching.

Andrew wraps his arm around me, fingers finding my clit effortlessly, and I’m so damn close. I’m moaning now, begging him to finish me, let me come again. I’m shaking with it, right on the edge, and he doesn’t stop. Andrew pounds into me, and then his thumb comes down on my clit and I’m screaming. I’m coming, and it tears through me like a storm. I sag against the window as he continues to move, and I feel his cock jerk as he comes too.

This pleasure feels like it’s never going to end, and I would be perfectly happy if it didn’t. I sag against the window as he slows, glancing down at our audience. Everyone has moved on except for the first man, who has a smile the size of Texas on his face.

My body is shivering with aftershocks, and as Andrew pulls out of me, I suddenly

feel like something's missing. He scoops me up and carries me back to his bed, where the coffee he made us—still warm—is waiting. “Well, I guess you are a screamer,” he says when we've settled back into the bed.

I snort. “Maybe I'm only a screamer with you.”

“I'm just fine with that.”

I finish my coffee and am dozing when I hear Andrew pick up his cellphone and make a call. “Hi, May, I'm going to be working from home today. Just let me know if there's anything urgent.”

“You don't have to stay home because of me,” I say through a fog of incoming sleep after he hangs up.

Andrew pulls me closer, fitting me against his chest. “I'd much rather stay here in bed with you. And tonight, we're going to dinner.”

11

I shouldn't have expected anything less, but going to dinner with Andrew is way more than I imagined. He fits me in a dress that he hasn't debuted and calls easily the fanciest car I've ever seen to take us to the restaurant. I raise an eyebrow when it pulls up to the curb. “Business is really that good, huh?”

He winks. “It's been all right.”

The young man driving the car hops out, and Andrew opens the door for me, and surprises me when he actually gets into the driver's seat. He sees my look. “I'm not really the chauffeur type.”

“There are certain advantages to having a driver you know.”

“Oh?”

I reach over and touch his arm, “You are free to do whatever you like while you’re being driven around.”

Even though his eyes are still on the street in front of us, I see the color in them deepen. “That’s an excellent point. Maybe I’ll think about that for next time.”

Andrew drives us to a restaurant in midtown called Serenity. It’s gorgeous Asian fusion, with dark and rich decor and a vibe of relaxed elegance. We’re seated immediately, and I wonder if Andrew comes here regularly, though I’m too busy taking in the little details of the restaurant to ask. Sculptures of glass flowers erupt at different points in the room, fabric twists in elegant drapes from the ceiling, and colored lights in the floor slowly rotate through the spectrum, giving the room a shifting rainbow glow.

“So,” Andrew says when we’ve settled and ordered, “you told me at the party that I’d hear the story of what you wanted to be.”

I shake my head. “You don’t want to hear that.”

He catches my hand across the table. “I do, actually.”

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I huff a sigh. It's not a story that I particularly enjoy telling, but I don't think he's going to let it go. "I wanted to be an interior designer. I went to school for it, and I even got a job right out of college. Heidi Carson's company."

Andrew raises an eyebrow, and I can tell he's impressed. Heidi runs one of the best design outfits in town.

"I was assisting her with the intent to move up to be an independent designer. I was working with her on a job, and offhand I made a suggestion, a small edit to one of her designs. The client loved it and wanted it implemented in more of the house."

I swallow, pushing down the familiar ache in my chest. "The next day Heidi called me into her office and fired me. She said that I wasn't ever supposed to make suggestions like that in front of a client, and that since I wasn't a full designer yet my opinion didn't count. That I made her look like a fool because she wasn't the one that suggested what the client really loved. I tried to find another job after that, but no one would take me. I didn't have a choice but to find another job. So three years and countless retail jobs later, here we are."

I look down at the table, taking a breath. There are more details to that story, the countless interviews that I got based on my portfolio and credentials, and the pained look on the interviewers faces when they got a well-timed phone call. No one wants to cross someone that big in the business, and they had no loyalty to a twenty-something nobody. But I don't want to relive all of that by dragging out the story longer than it needs to be. I told him the high points.

Andrew folds his hands together on the table, and he looks troubled. "So that's why

you said your opinion didn't matter yesterday."

Lifting my shoulders in a shrug, I carefully avoid his gaze.

"Delia, look at me."

It takes me a second, but I do.

"Your opinion one-hundred-percent matters. Heidi was clearly threatened by what you did, and reacted very badly. But that has no bearing on whether what you say has value. It does."

"Thanks," I mumble. Rationally, I know what he says is true, but it's hard to erase that ringing voice in my head that's saying that I don't matter.

"I've used Heidi and her company before. That won't happen again."

Our food arrives, and it's the perfect distraction. There's a little glowing spark in my stomach from his words and his promise not to engage Heidi again, but I don't want to talk about Heidi or my issues, not when we've been having such a good time. I see my opening. "Do you have an idea for your next show?"

Andrew's eyes light up, and he starts to speak. I don't wonder why everyone loves him and wants to be involved with him and work with him. The passionate way he speaks about everything—especially his work—is contagious. "I have a few ideas for that fall collection. But I was thinking about doing a special show before that to advertise some of the stuff we already have, and of course, for the publicity."

"What are you thinking?"

He tilts his head. "I want to use the gallery again, I think. It's a great space and really

flexible. As for theme, I'm thinking something royal and exotic. A good transition between summer and fall because of jewel tones."

"That could be fun," I say.

"Or maybe I just want to put diamonds all over your body and make you sparkle."

Arousal sparks low in my belly, and my mouth goes dry. "How would that fit the theme of royalty?"

"You'd be the queen, of course." The smirk on his face does things to me, and I'm suddenly squirming in my seat, ready to drag him back to his apartment and fuck him again. I don't think I'll ever get tired of that.

The rest of our meal is light and easy, trading silly ideas for the art show and flirting, each of us getting a little more turned on. No more talk of past disappointments.

It's a perfect summer evening, and I'm enjoying the breeze as Andrew goes to get the car. The sky is a beautiful plum purple, and I can't keep the smile off my face. I'm not sure how I got so lucky.



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“You were with Andrew Xellum in there.”

I look away from the sky, blinking as a tall brunette saunters towards me. “Yes, I was.”

Her expression turns to one of disgust. “Looks like he finally found model that he thought was good enough to fuck him. Don’t worry though, you’re not special. He’ll drop you as soon as he’s bored and move onto his next ‘muse.’”

I take a step back, her words hitting like knives. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter who I am. But you should know that you’ve made a huge mistake.”

“I don’t think I have.”

A tiny smile appears on her mouth, and it makes my stomach crawl. “You’ll see if you feel the same way tomorrow.”

And then she turns and walks away, disappearing around the corner just as Andrew pulls around with the car. I realize that my mouth is open in shock, and I feel a little numb as I get in the car. “Are you all right?” he asks.

“I don’t think so.” I tell him what just happened as he drives, and I watch his expression harden. “Do you know who it was?”

He shakes his head. “No. Like you said before—and it’s an accurate criticism—I don’t hire many blondes. As much as I try to treat all my employees well, there are

always some conflicts. I've been doing this long enough that I have a few people who are less than friendly towards me."

The rest of the drive is silent. I'm not sure what to say and I can see from the look on Andrew's face that he doesn't want to talk about it. I'd be upset to if the reverse had happened. We're still silent as he passes the car off to the same young man, but he takes my hand as we walk into his apartment building, and once we're inside he pulls me closer, and he makes me forget her entirely.

12

This morning it's not the sunlight that wakes me, it's my phone. I didn't set an alarm, so it's a text. I click the button to acknowledge it without opening my eyes. Then there's another sound. And another. And another. I groan, and I feel Andrew shift behind me. He rolls over and tucks his arm around my waist, and I can feel the hard length of his cock against my ass. "Good morning," he whispers.

"Bad morning," I say. "I'm going to kill whoever is texting me." Pulling my phone off the nightstand, I glance at the screen. All the texts are from Fleece. She knows I'm with Andrew. I don't think I've ever seen so many exclamation points in a single text message when I told her what happened yesterday.

Have you seen this??

What the fuck is going on?

Delia, if you're sleeping WAKE. UP.

It's only on the one website now but it will be everywhere in a few hours.

I rub my eyes and try to ignore the way Andrew is kissing my neck while I click on

the link she sent in her first text. If it's another story about me and my racy moments, I'm fine. It's probably just a news story about me and Andrew having dinner last night. But as the screen loads, my stomach drops. A giant black headline.

## ANDREW XELLUM DROVE ME INSANE: THE DESIGNER'S FORMER MUSE TELLS ALL

I sit straight up in bed. Right below the headline is a picture of the woman from last night. "What the fuck," I say.

"What is it?"

I pass him the phone. Now I know what she meant by seeing how I felt today. She knew that story was coming out. "Shit," Andrew says, grabbing his phone and dialing.

He's on the phone with May in seconds, who's already heard the news. I pick my phone back up and read the article. I want to know what she's saying. I know immediately that none of this is true. She's saying that Andrew pushed her to her breaking point. That he never let her eat because he wanted her to be thinner for his shows, that he was controlling of her and her life and appearance to the point of abuse. That he kept her locked up in a house so that no one could see her unless he allowed it. The woman—Maya Hart—is someone I recognize now. She used to do what I do for Andrew in terms of modeling, and I always thought her work was brilliant. Not only that, but she has some of the world's biggest campaigns right now. I'm surprised that I didn't recognize her last night, but I chalk it up to the fact that I was too shocked by what she was saying.

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She claims that she had to go to rehab for anorexia and get psychiatric help because he abused her. Further, she claims that any person associated with him, especially models, are in danger.

Bullshit. I've seen the way Andrew treats his models. He's the ultimate professional, and I've never ever seen him tell anyone they were fat or that they needed to lose weight. He hasn't locked me up or ever tried to control my everyday life. I'm not sure why she's doing this, but it's not true. None of it. I know it in my gut.

Andrew comes back into the room, already half-dressed and still on the phone. "Yeah, I'll be there as soon as I can. Hold all the media requests until I get there." He hangs up the phone and is buttoning his shirt.

"Are you all right?"

"I have to go to the studio, I need to get ahead of this."

"Of course," I nod. "I should go home for a little while, too. I could use some fresh clothes. But I'll see you later?"

He kisses me briefly, though I notice he doesn't meet my eyes. "Of course." Grabbing his phone and a jacket he heads out the front door. I take my time getting ready. I root around in Andrew's workshop until I find something more casual to wear that won't have me doing the two-day walk of shame in that party dress. But I take the dress with me. No way in hell I'm letting that go.

I haven't answered Fleece, and I know that she's freaking out, so I decide to stop by

the Blind Scorpion on the way home. The minute I walk in she's on me, "What the hell is going on?"

I drop onto my perch at the bar, even though it's way too early to drink anything. "Honestly, I don't have a clue." I fill her in on everything that happened over the last days, from the incredible sex to Maya confronting me.

"So what are you going to do?" she asks. "Are you going to break it off? Stop working for him?"

"Why on earth would I do that?"

Fleece gives me a look. "I'm not dumb. I read the article."

"And you actually believed it?"

She has the good sense to look a little embarrassed. "Like I told you before, I've heard things. I wouldn't put what she says past him."

I shake my head. "I've never seen him do anything like that. And you've seen me? Has he tried to control my life? No."

"That's true..." she says, wiping down the bar with a cloth even though it's already clean.

"I don't know why Maya is doing this, and Andrew left too quickly for me to ask, but there's more to this." I grab my bag, suddenly determined to find out what's really happening. "I'll let you know when I find out."

Fleece gives me a small smile. "For what it's worth, I hope you're right."

It doesn't take me long to swing by my apartment and grab the few things I need before I'm on my way to Xellum Studios. I should have made Andrew tell me exactly what this meant this morning. My phone is continuously buzzing with questions from friends and notifications of new articles surrounding it. People are asking questions about me, and whether Andrew is subjecting me to the same 'abuse.' He hasn't been answering my calls. Directly to voicemail every time.

Whatever it is that Maya was trying to do, so far she's been successful. There was an announcement that Whitman & Crown are considering dropping Andrew's line because of the 'revelations.' If they drop out, other companies will too.

There's a crowd of reporters outside the studio. Up till now, I haven't been afraid of the press. But fighting my way through the crowd who's shouting my name and pressing microphones into my face is scary. I finally break through and the security guard lets me inside. For a second, I just lean against the door and catch my breath. This is insane. Absolute madness.

The studio seems oddly deserted. I don't hear the usual hum of noise that is the sewing shop and the other assistants bustling around. Upstairs is quiet too. I head down the hallway towards Andrew's office, and I hear his voice and also May's. I come around the corner and May is at her desk. She sees me and freezes mid-sentence on her phone call. "I'm going to have to call you back," she says into the receiver. "Delia, he can't see you right now."

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“I get that he’s busy, I just want to help.”

“He’s asked me not to let you in,” she says with a sympathetic smile.

A bolt of ice goes through me. “Excuse me, what?”

“I just think it might be better if you just went home.”

I straighten my shoulders, “I’m sorry, May.” I push past her and shove open the door to Matthew’s office, leaving her gaping. She follows me in and Andrew’s head snaps up as I open the door.

I put my hands on my hips and square off in front of him. “I get that this is probably one of the worst days of your life, but shutting me out of it is not going to make this better or easier for you.”

Andrew looks past me to May. “Give us a minute please, May,” he says softly. When she closes the door behind her he says, “I’m sorry.”

“What the hell is going on? And why are you trying to hide from me.”

He looks a little guilty. “A couple of reasons. I wanted to protect you from some of this. Connection to me right now only damages you. And second...” he hesitates. “I’ve said some things to you about wanting to push your boundaries and make you more than you are. I thought...I thought you might believe what they’re saying.”

I cross the room towards him. “I don’t believe them. And you don’t get to tell me that

I matter and that I'm special without treating yourself the same way." Yanking his face down to mine, I kiss him. "You're talented and brilliant and there are tons of people who know that. Just tell me the truth about why she's doing this."

"I loved working with her," he says. "She's an excellent model, but she didn't want to just be my model. And in the years that we worked together it was a constant onslaught of hints and suggestions that we should be together as more than just professional colleagues. I didn't want that." The corner of his mouth pulls up into a smile. "I didn't want that with her. Then one day I came home to find her naked in my bed. I severed our professional relationship the next day."

I press my forehead against his chest. "So she's attacking you because you're with me." Guilt creeps up my spine. He could lose everything because of this.

"I don't have any regrets about being with you. None."

"Okay."

Andrew lifts my face so that I'm looking at him. "I'm serious. This is not your fault." He kisses me, and I allow myself to melt into him a little bit.

When we come up for air I ask him, "How bad is it?"

His expression clouds over. "Not good. People having been pulling out of meetings and stores are threatening to drop the line because of the article."

I drop myself into one of the chairs in front of his desk. "But anyone who knows you and has worked with you knows these things aren't true."

"Bad press is bad press," he shrugs. "With something out there like that, being connected to me is a liability."



So,” I say, “they’re afraid of this article because Maya is a huge model and they don’t want to offend her, and they don’t want to lose sales by being in business with you.”

“Pretty much.”

I think for a second. “So all we have to do is get people who like you to spin the story the other way.”

“I think it’s easier said than done, but I’m open to ideas. What are you thinking?”

Smiling, I pull out my cellphone. “I’m thinking we have to move fast and you have to make me a queen,” I say as I dial. “Fleece, can you tell Barbara you have somewhere to be tonight?”

13

The gallery looks completely different from last time, but even with all the bad press, there’s a crowd waiting outside to come in. I can’t believe everything we did in the last twenty-four hours. I’m exhausted and nervous and I feel like I might throw up, but we have to do this.

Andrew comes up behind me, hands skimming my hips and lips against my neck. “Thank you for this.”

“Thank you for what you said this morning.”

He called a reporter this morning and submitted his rebuttal. A simple, short version of the story that bleeds truth because of its simplicity and confirmable details. But it was the end that took me completely off guard.

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I have always prided myself on professional behavior. I have countless colleagues who could attest to it, but to ask them to put themselves at risk because of these rumors would be unfair to them. To those who know me, I hope you know that I would never behave in such a way. To those who don't know me, you may make your own judgment.

Just recently, I did something for the first time that I would consider to be unprofessional. I crossed a line I have never crossed before. But I don't regret it. I have found the love of my life, and if I have to live with these rumors for the rest of my life, I will. Because they don't matter, and we know the truth.

I almost cried when I read that last paragraph, and then I kissed him. Now, he pulls me back against him, and I pull away. "Careful, you're going to ruin the design."

I'm completely naked, and just like he suggested at the restaurant, I'm covered in diamonds. Not real, but they look real enough.

"I look forward to removing every one of these later. Slowly."

I laugh. "I'm looking forward to that too, but let's do this first."

We transformed the gallery into what looks like a royal throne room, the outside walls covered with giant photographs that we took yesterday. Andrew called in every favor he could, and his employees came and some friends, too. The photos are of the two of us in different situations, and in every one, I am a queen. I was right, Andrew is an amazing model, and even though we were frenzied, we had a good time. I want to do more of that when we have more time.

There's a photo to match—and counteract—every accusation. A photo of me at a table of food eating a huge meal while Andrew has none. A photo of me locking him in a dungeon and throwing away the key. A photo of him sitting by my feet while I sit on a throne. Others too. It's a strong statement, that I'm not only a queen but his queen. Something we hope will back up his words that appeared online this morning.

And then there are the final photos. Taken late last night after we kicked everyone out of the studio. Andrew worshiping the queen's body. Pictures that are scandalous and verging on indecency, but they're my favorite. I didn't know that I could look like that.

And now, in a few minutes, I'm going to sit in the gallery in nothing but diamonds. We've agreed that Andrew shouldn't be seen. That the work and his words should speak for themselves. That also works to my advantage, for the little addition I've added. Near the entrance to the gallery, a list of names. Hundreds of people who have worked with Andrew and Maya, and agreed that he is nothing like what she claimed. People willing to put their reputations on the line for him. It's clearly labeled, and right at the front of the gallery so you can't miss it.

"Okay," he says. "Good luck."

I lean up to kiss him. "We don't need luck."

Lounging on the throne, I hear the doors open and the drone of voices as people pour inside. I hear the shocked gasps as people see the list of names, and their impressed whispers as they enter the throne room. In the other shows I've done for Andrew, I've been moving. Not this time. I'm frozen on the throne, the diamonds on my skin scattering the light in patterns across the walls. I see cameras and microphones—the press are the first people in the door—and I hope that we've made a difference. I hope that this will stop the bleeding. Andrew's reputation may never be spotless, but at least it won't be destroyed.

People seem to like the exhibit, and as time wears on, I begin to relax. We set a limited time for this, just a couple of hours. We don't need a huge audience, just the ones that will get the word out. There's a commotion near the door, and I have to fight the urge to move as Maya walks in. I thought she might show up, but I was not prepared for the way anger rises up in my chest, threatening to strangle me.

Suddenly the air in the room feels tight, and the cameras and microphones are all on her as she approaches me. I meet her eyes, unsure of what she's going to do. Unsure if I should break character.

There's a mocking smirk on her face as she takes me in. She doesn't speak loudly, but the whole room can hear her. "You pulled this together quickly. Did you even sleep?"

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Slowly, I turn my head so I'm facing her more fully. "No, I did not. Neither did any of the other people who came to help."

Maya's smile falters. "No one would help that man, not after what he's done."

"Did you not read the sign at the entrance? There are hundreds of people willing to vouch for Andrew's character."

"Why are you doing this?" she asks, her eyes narrow.

I take a beat, and then look away from her. "You know why."

She stiffens, and out of the corner of my eye, I see her face fall. Just like that, I suddenly understand what she was hoping for. She saw us together and thought that since he had suddenly slept with a model that this was her chance. She wanted to drive me away from him because she's still in love with him. Or what she thinks is love.

"You'll never be as good as we were," she hisses at me.

I let a tiny smile form. "Maybe not. But we'll be happier."

Maya turns on her heel and storms out. Half the reporters in the room follow her outside, no doubt to question her about the exchange. There's something in my chest that's released. It's over, for now. The video of our exchange will be online, and it will take the sting out of her accusations. It's enough.

Suddenly antsy, I can barely sit still for the rest of the time that the gallery is open. As soon as the doors close and the rest of the audience leaves, I spring off the throne and run to the back room and launch myself at Andrew. “Thank you,” he says into my hair. “This was perfect. You were perfect. You have no idea how hot that was.”

“I may have an idea,” I say, pulling him further into the depths of the studio. I see a rack of clothes and pull him behind it. My whole body is charged with energy, and I have his belt undone before he grabs me by the wrists. “What are you doing?”

“What do you think?” I raise an eyebrow. “We won, and I want to make you feel as good as you make me feel. Right now.”

“Delia—”

“Andrew,” I say, reaching for him, “are you saying you don’t want to see me kneeling in front of you, naked, covered in diamonds, and sucking your cock?”

He groans, and lets me go. I grab his cock and pull it out, stroking it to full hardness—he’s already halfway there. I haven’t done this yet, and I’ve wanted to, so I take my time. I start with just my lips, kissing the tip and moving them up and down the length of him. I love the feel of him, smooth and hard, and I listen so the way his breath deepens when I kiss along his skin.

Now I use just my tongue to explore him, licking just under the base of his head, and downward. I cover him in long, broad, strokes that have his hands moving to my hair. I’d smile if my mouth weren’t otherwise occupied.

When I finally take him into my mouth, the sound Andrew makes sends a burst of heat straight through me. His fingers tighten in my hair and he pulls me closer. I love the way he fills up my mouth, the rich taste of him—I don’t need him to pull me closer for me to take him deeper.

“God, Delia,” his voice is hoarse, and I think that I should do this more often if it makes him sound like that. I suck back along his length, circling his head with my tongue before plunging down again. And again. I set up a steady rhythm, and I feel the way he’s growing tense, hear the way his breath intakes as I take him all the way down.

He’s speaking through gritted teeth now. “I’m not going to last.”

I blink up at him, and we lock eyes. His jaw is clenched and his gaze has that same fire it had on that first day. Slowly, I take his cock all the way while he watches me, and I watch him. That energy that began crawling through me during the show has turned into flaming arousal, and I’m so wet that I can feel the diamonds loosening on my thighs.

I speed up again, and Andrew goes utterly still. His hands are gripping my hair, and his breath goes shallow. I know he’s close, and I use it to my advantage. I tease him, sucking and licking, breaking up the rhythm so he doesn’t know what to expect, so he’s on the edge.

“Fuck,” he mutters under his breath.

His hips are moving, thrusting into my mouth, and I meet him stroke for stroke. With one last push I take him deep, swallowing him so my nose is against his skin, and Andrew comes, crying out my name. His cock jerks in my mouth and I swallow every drop of what he gives me, savoring the salty taste along with something that’s deeper—just him.

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When he's finished, he doesn't move, hands relaxing in my hair as I lick him clean. "Shit," he says, and I laugh, making sure he sees when I lick my lips. "I didn't know that you could do that."

"Maybe I'm just full of surprises."

I let him kiss me, and wind my arms around his neck. "Now take me home and to bed, and fuck me before I fall into a long, long sleep."

Andrew makes a noise low in his throat. "It's funny, I've don't think I've ever told you that the couch in my office turns into a bed."

"Oh really?" I say, raising an eyebrow. "Is that an invitation?"

He chuckles. "I think it's a necessity, because after that, I can't wait until we get home to peel those little diamonds off you."

"Let's go then." I pull him towards the stairs.

"I hope you know I'll be using my mouth to get those off," he says lightly. "I intend to be very thorough."

"I would expect nothing less."

He stops me at the stop of the stairs, pressing me into the wall and kissing me deeply. "I love you, Delia. I knew it when you walked into that room. Everyone may think it was a stunt but you are my queen and I can't even tell you how much I love you."



Tears prick my eyes and I kiss him back. “I love you too.”

## Epilogue

### One Year Later

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.”

Andrew’s face is all innocence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s just a normal runway show.”

Of course it’s just a normal runway show, except that Andrew, my new husband, convinced me it might be fun for me to wear a vibrator while I’m walking in the show. Of course he’s the one who has the controller.

He starts laughing at the look on my face. “I love you, wife.”

“I love you too, husband,” I say and give a mock sigh.

Despite the fact that I’m embarrassed, I’ve learned that Andrew has a strange way of knowing exactly what I need to fill in that exhibitionist streak I have, and this is only his latest solution. We’ve only been married a month, and already he’s found what feels like endless ways to get me off in public. And damn him, I love it every single time.

“This would be better if it weren’t lingerie,” I say to him.

“I disagree.”

Andrew’s new lingerie line has been a huge hit, and this show is the debut of the new season. There’s a lot riding on this show, and I don’t want to mess it up because I’m

on the verge of coming while on the catwalk. He pulls me against him, hands cupping my ass and squeezing. “I think it’s perfect for lingerie. If you come, people will just think it’s a test run for the clothes.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Insatiable, maybe,” he says, taking my mouth in a kiss. “Now get out there and look sexy.” He gives me a wink and I close my eyes. The show has already started and the backstage area is crazy. My turn on the runway is coming up fast. My heart is pounding out of my chest, the way it always does when I walk a show. Even after a year of it, I’m not used to it.

The stagehand gives me the signal and I come out of the curtain with strong steps. The music we’ve chosen for this show is fast and edgy, and you can’t be shy about walking to it. About halfway down the runway, I feel the vibrations start, and I nearly lose my rhythm. I’m going to kill him, I really am. Or fuck him. The second one is more likely.

I’m wearing a gorgeous creation of red silk that leaves little to the imagination, and suddenly in my mind I’m thinking about what it would be like to take it off slowly for Andrew, which is I’m sure what he intended. On this runway with hundreds of eyes on me, that spark rises through me. Swift and fierce arousal that makes me so much more aware of everything around me. I pose at the end of the runway and give a little smile for the camera before heading off the stage.

The vibrations turn off as I’m whirled into the next look, and I pass Andrew on the way back to the stage. His arms are crossed and he’s trying to look innocent. I don’t even have time to say anything, I’m back up on the stage and the sensation is back stronger. God, it feels good. I’d never seen this kind of vibrator before, a little contraption that clings to my clit and vibrates.

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Any stronger and I'm going to have moisture running down my legs. Not necessarily what I need on the runway. My third look is the most daring, and the last look of the show. Black fabric hanging over my breasts and my pussy held up by nearly invisible threads. It looks like the fabric is just floating around me. Andrew is standing right by the runway this time, ready for his curtain call. The grin on my face tells me that I don't have a chance.

I nearly stumble as I walk on, taken aback by the intensity of the vibrations. Heat licks up my spine because I'm nearly naked and close to coming in front of a crowd of people. Damn my husband, he knows me too well. Striking the best poses I can manage, I get off the stage and glare at him as he takes his bow, and as soon as he exits I grab his hand and shove him into the utility closet.

"This seems familiar," he says, laughing.

"Shut up and turn that thing back on." I unbutton his pants and palm his cock, which is already half hard.

"Yes, ma'am." He lifts me and I wrap my legs around him just in time for him to slam into me. This closet is so small, my back is up against a set of shelves, and his is up against another. The vibrator's springs back to life, and I let go, coming instantly. I cry out, and I know that everyone backstage will hear me, and I don't care.

Andrew fucks me harder, faster. Later, we'll go slowly.

"You liked that, didn't you?" He pushes deeper into me, and I love the way he fills me up. Even after all this time, the way he fits into me perfectly makes me love him

even more. “You liked almost coming in front of all those strangers.”

“Yes.” I crush my mouth down on his and I come again. The little toy isn’t letting me rest, sending spikes of pleasure through me, and I’m shuddering with it. Shaking. Shivering. I can’t see the room or Andrew or anything. I’m breathless and blind, at the mercy of this intense pleasure.

I’m about to come a third time, and this time Andrew comes with me, groaning as I almost scream into his mouth. I never want this to stop. I always want to feel this good. This perfect. Oh god yes yes yes

I think I might pass out from the pleasure, but the little toy shuts off, and I sag against Andrew. He lets me down, slipping out of me, and I know that I’m a mess. The delicate lingerie is torn, and what’s left of Andrew is running down my legs.

He kisses me, softly this time. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Damn you.”

He chuckles. “If you want to stop doing things like this, you just let me know.”

“How can I say that when it leads to sex like that?”

“My point exactly,” he says, grinning. “And as much as I’d like to stay in this closet with you, I think we should probably meet some of the people who came to the show.”

I sigh. “You’re right. Will you bring me a robe first, though? I think I’ve exposed myself enough for one day.”

Andrew pulls me against him so I can feel the length of his perfect body against

mine. “Whatever you wish, my queen.”

THE END

Want to find out what happens on Andrew and Delia’s honeymoon? Click here for a bonus story!

And come say hi on Facebook! <https://www.facebook.com/PennyWylder>

Want another hot and dirty read? Check out the first chapter of DEEP IN YOU, available now!

I flick through the Pornfix selection until I find my favorite go-to. This one is particularly hot—two huge guys, both with 10” dicks, thick ones to boot—spit-roasting a buxom blonde girl. As usual, I’m picturing myself in her shoes, naked and on all fours between two hot-as-hell hulks of men, who are about to do whatever they please with me.

It doesn’t take long to get my panties damp and my clit aching.

I kneel on my bed, eyes still on the TV, mesmerized by the way their thick cocks look as they plunge into her—one guy taking her from behind, his dick already slick with her juices, and the other deep-throat fucking her from the front while she cups his ass with both hands, mouth wide open as she moans with desire. I know the feeling, girl. I’m thirsty too.

But unlike her, I’m going solo again. As usual. Frankly, I’ve never met a guy who can manage to make me feel as full or as satisfied as I can myself. After more than a few failed dates, hookups and one-night stands failed to perform, I figure I’m better off this way.

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I finish lubing up my favorite toy—the XL realistically veined dildo, rainbow-colored just for fun—and grab a set of anal beads to slather in lube too. One hole has never really been enough to get me off.

My clit is aching with unfulfilled desire by the time the scene on screen shifts to the best part. The guys lift the girl up between them, one spreading her ass cheeks wide. I moan a little as I imitate the motion, sitting up on the bed and pushing the first bead into my ass. I can feel my sphincter close around that first bead, tight and aching for more. I watch the porn stars lower their shared girl, one still with his cock deep in her pussy, the other slowly entering her ass, inch by inch, as she cries out in pleasure.

I push a second bead into my ass, then a third. With each bead, the size increases and the delicious stretched, full sensation increases. By the time I have the whole string in my ass, I'm moaning alone in my darkened bedroom, my other hand hovering above my clit, rubbing across my mound, careful not to touch my clit directly, not yet. I want to make this last. I deserve it after the week I've had.

I take the dildo next and lean back, sitting on my ass just enough to make me really feel the beads stuffed in there. At the same time, I drag my gaze back to the TV, to the guys as they lift the girl between them and start to pump into her, fucking both holes, filling her completely.

I push the dildo into my pussy, a single hard, deep thrust to get me going. I cry out as it enters me, stretching my tight pussy wide, stuffing me fully. A little bit of my juices mingled with the lube drips down onto my fingers, and I imagine that it's those guys' fingers instead, feeling my pussy lips, enjoying the sight of me stuffed with their cocks.

I work myself with both hands, one tugging and pressing alternately on the string of anal beads and the other pumping the dildo deep into myself, faster, faster, until I'm working as fast as I can. I buck against the bed, moaning in sync with the girl on the screen being mercilessly fucked by those two hot, huge hunks.

She comes the same time I do, though her screaming sounds a lot louder. I gasp aloud as the orgasm rocks through my body, making my pussy clench tight around the dildo. I can feel the beads more than ever as my ass tightens too, my whole body reacting to the sensation of being so completely taken.

I sink down against the pillows, panting, my clit still twitching, the aftershocks of the orgasm rocketing through my nerve endings.

Then I pull the dildo out of me slowly, an inch at a time. I take out the anal beads next, shivering each time one pops free and sends another riot through my nervous system.

When I'm finished, I turn off the TV and lever myself upright. I tiptoe to the bathroom and turn the sink on warm. Wash down both toys and glance at myself in the mirror with a sigh. There are bags under my hazel-green eyes, and my cute, short little red pixie cut needs an update ASAP. The brown roots show and the ends are frayed and split. Signs of how little I've been paying attention to myself, what with all the insanity at the bakery.

But I don't have time to fix myself up right now. I don't have time to do anything, really, not even scope out a decent one-night stand at the local bar scene. I need to be back at work by 6am tomorrow, which means I should already be in bed. Even this one-on-one dalliance with me, myself and I took up more time than it should have.

I finish washing off the toys and pack them back into the drawer that currently holds my entire sex life. Some people might be embarrassed to own this many

toys—everything from vibrators in every size, to anal plugs and beads and bullets, up to just about any flavor of dildo you can imagine, with and without vibration depending on the mood. Hell, there's even a suction-cup model that sticks to the wall, for when I really need a hands-free moment. Another one is weighted to the floor so I can ride cowgirl without needing any one-night stand to ride.

My friends sometimes make fun of me—they don't know what I'm into at all. They joke about how I haven't gotten any for ages, but they don't know that I can take care of my own needs—or that no guy I've found has ever even been willing to entertain the idea of helping out.

Much as I wish I could find a guy as kinky as I am, I don't claim that persona in front of my friends. They know I like something unusual, but have no idea what exactly. The closest my bestie Lara ever came to finding out was when she almost stumbled onto one of my sex-toy-of-the-month club deliveries (which would have killed me from embarrassment). But honestly, what's the difference between this and hooking up with strangers every so often? A girl's got needs—and I meet mine just fine. I've yet to meet a guy who's even come close to being able to fulfill me, so I'd rather take my sex life into my own hands, thank you very much.



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I slide the drawer closed and turn off the light. Then I face-plant into bed and try to ignore the alarm clock in the corner with its huge flashing light-up display.

11:32pm. That only leaves me 5 and a half hours of sleep before I need to be upright and getting ready for tomorrow. Tomorrow, which will be just as insane as yesterday and the day before. Great. Can't wait.

I pull my pillow over my face and try my best to doze off. In my mind's eye, I can still see the chiseled abs and sculpted chests of those guys from the porno. I drift off imagining myself sandwiched between them. Though part of me still feels guilty, even now, for letting myself get this distracted.

Tomorrow I'll fix it. Tomorrow I'll get my head in the game.

Tonight, I let myself have my fantasies, if only for a little while.