



Her Inconvenient Wedding Date (Unexpected Dates #2)

Author: *Liwen Y. Ho*

Category: Romance

Description: I always thought I'd marry for love... not because of a family tradition.

As the eldest daughter, my life's basically one long checklist of responsibilities—especially when it comes to making sure my younger sister gets her happily ever after. And apparently, that means I need to tie the knot first.

Groan.

I'm an engineer by day, a beauty blogger by night, and a problem-solver 24/7. But even I wasn't prepared for the solution to my marriage problem to show up in the form of Hunter Payne—my tall, charming, and goofy coworker who just so happened to save me from the world's most awkward date.

Out of the kindness of his heart, he offers to marry me. For three months only. Just until the family pressure eases up. Totally platonic, totally practical.

Until it's not.

Because three seconds into our union, a surprise kiss makes some very inconvenient emotions rise to the surface.

How am I going to survive this marriage without falling for the one guy I promised I wouldn't catch feelings for?

Total Pages (Source): 20

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“Sisters: half your DNA, twice your drama, and triple the fun.” ~Unknown

Do you know what’s harder than being the oldest daughter? Being the oldest daughter who’s responsible for her baby sister’s happiness.

Yep, I, Lily Lam, am the one person preventing my sister from finding her very own happily ever after.

It’s not like I’m trying to stop her from getting married.

I’ve known her fiancé for over a decade since both of them were sophomores in college.

Bruce is the ultimate definition of husband material —smart (he graduated from Harvard and Stanford), successful (he has the gall to have both a law and medical degree), and devoted (my sister, Jasmine, is the only woman he’s ever dated).

Plus, he speaks perfect Mandarin despite being an ABC (American-born Chinese).

And he loves the Lord, and it appears the Lord loves him, too, because he not only has perfect skin, but he’s also tall.

God obviously adores Jasmine, too, to have brought Bruce into her life .

Meanwhile, I’m like the ugly duckling still waiting for my swan moment to arrive.

Not that I'm complaining about my looks; I'm grateful to have 20/20 vision, straight teeth (and yes, I still wear a retainer at night at age thirty-four), and hair that usually cooperates despite its low porosity.

It's just that I've never had luck with guys, in particular Chinese ones.

You see, I'm not a typical Asian. I'm not a petite girl with porcelain skin and dainty mannerisms. By all accounts, I'm more of an Amazonian or Mongolian, if we're being specific.

I apparently inherited all my genes from my dad, and I'm convinced there must have been giants on his side of the family.

I'm five feet ten with hips made for childbearing, according to my five-foot-two mother.

I tan easily and am known to speak my mind a little too freely.

My best trait? Apparently, my brain. I'm like the poster girl for STEM (that's science, technology, engineering, and math).

I got a perfect score on the math portion of the SAT, graduated with honors from Cal with a degree in Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences, and now work as a Software Engineer at one of the most well-known tech companies in Silicon Valley.

So, thank the Lord for giving me a big noggin to match my size nine feet.

Buzz!

A text from Jasmine pops up on my phone, pulling my gaze away from the two large monitors on my desk.

The urge to ignore it is about as strong as my need for another matcha latte, but being the responsible big sister that I am, I swipe it open.

Sure enough, there's a photo of a guy with a message that addresses me as older sister in Mandarin: Jie, how about this one? I'm sure you'll love him!

I roll my eyes as I place my phone back in its spot next to my collection of miniature corgi plushies, the latter which makes me smile despite my annoyance.

Since I work within these 12x12 walls for 37.

5% of the day, I try to make it as comfy, cozy, and cute as possible.

But the string of lights, pom-pom garland, and color-coordinated office accessories do nothing to brighten my mood today.

This is the fourth text of its kind that I've gotten from my mei mei, aka little sister in Mandarin, and it's not even noon yet. I don't know how she has so much spare time on her hands working as an optometrist. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was secretly a part-time matchmaker as well.

Which is sort of accurate. She just doesn't get paid for her services, but she works as if her future marriage depends on how quickly she can find me a husband. Something that is also unfortunately true.

The sad fact of the matter is that according to family tradition, my sister can't get married before I do.

I, as the older sibling, am supposed to pave the way for the younger one.

By all accounts, I've done that for Jasmine.

Being five years older, I went through everything first—from puberty, to braces, to college applications, and job interviews.

Well, almost everything. The one area Jasmine has more experience in than me is romance.

Somehow, I've been surrounded by the opposite sex in the workplace for my entire adult life, but I have yet to meet Mr. Right.

Buzz!

Now my phone's vibrating with an incoming call, and I know without looking at my screen that it's Jasmine. And because my guilt has doubled in the past two years since she got engaged, I quickly answer it.

"Hey, Mei, how's it going?"

"Jie! You haven't replied to any of my texts. Which of the guys appeals to you the most?"

"Well, it depends how you define the word appeal," I answer cautiously.

I'm well aware that if I show even a smidge of interest in one of them, she'll have a date lined up for me for tomorrow or possibly today.

"Are we talking about physically appealing? Because they all look about the same to me. Kind of like a lot of the guys I work with."

"That's because they're engineers. I thought you'd appreciate someone like-minded. You didn't seem too impressed with the surgeons, dentists, or lawyers I showed you before."

I glance around my work area at the surrounding low-wall cubicles.

The dark-haired heads I see all have a similar hairstyle—straight across the forehead with tapered edges around the ears.

Glasses accessorize their faces, some with thick, black frames, others with thin, wiry ones.

They all sport T-shirts or polos with logos of various companies around the Bay, obvious free swag that they picked up from conferences they attended over the years.

These guys are the very definition of “tech bros” and, quite honestly, they’re like brothers to me.

None of them make my heart go pitter-patter or my knees feel like wet noodles with a single glance my way.

Not even when one of them solves a programming problem that I’ve been dealing with for over a week.

“I don’t know, Mei. I’m just not into guys with bowl cuts and glasses—not that there’s anything wrong with that look,” I quickly add when I spot one of the framed photos I have on my desk.

In it, Bruce stands between my mother and Jasmine, looking exactly like the description I just gave.

He also literally has all the five Cs that my parents prayed for in a son-in-law—Chinese, Christian, career, condo (or in his case, a four-bedroom house), and cash.

And the fact that he's in so many of our family photos shows how ready my parents are to marry Jasmine off to him.

And I'm the only thing standing in their way .

"You know me," I continue with a sigh. "I've always had a thing for blond hair and blue eyes. Someone like a young Leo. He was so dreamy in his twenties."

"Jie, be serious! Ma and Ba would never let you marry someone who's not Chinese."

"I know, I know." That dream had set sail when I was a teenager, then quickly sunk into the far depths of the Atlantic like the Titanic did.

My mother nearly had a heart attack when she found out I'd gone to prom with a very cute and very non-Asian football player.

She gave me a good talking-to after that to make sure I understood why it's important to marry a man who can give her grandchildren who will be able to communicate with her in Mandarin, even though she has no problems speaking English.

As I've learned over the years, it's best not to argue with my mother when she has her heart set on something.

Even when that something makes no sense at all.

A soft sniffle comes over the line that makes my insides twist. "Are you crying, Mei?"

"No, it's just allergies."

I wince, knowing full well she's fibbing. Like everything about her, Jasmine has the

perfect immune system. She hardly ever gets sick, and she certainly does not get sneezing attacks every spring like I do. She's obviously having a hard time dealing with her obstinate, love-challenged sister.

And I can't blame her.

Cringing, I swallow my pride and soften my stance.

What's one date? It's not like I have to marry the guy I choose.

I just need to make it look like I'm trying to find a husband.

My hope—and secret plan of attack—is that if I put some effort into dating, I can convince my mother to let Jasmine set a wedding date.

Once the invitations are mailed out, there will be no turning back—whether I'm married or not.

"I'll go with guy number three," I announce with forced enthusiasm. "He seems harmless enough."

Jasmine gasps. "You will?! Thank you, thank you! You're the best sister in the entire universe!"

"Yeah, yeah. You're not so bad yourself."

"I'll text you the time and place for your date as soon as I hang up!"

My shoulders immediately tense up. "You already have the date planned?"

"Of course. You're on for dinner and boba tonight."

“But how did you know I was going to pick this guy?”

“I didn’t. I set up dates with all four of them, so I’ll need to cancel the other three ASAP. Oh, a patient just walked in. I’ll talk to you later, Jie!”

Once she hangs up, I’m left staring at my phone and shaking my head. If the word efficiency had a mascot, it would be my sister. She never ceases to amaze me with her multitasking skills.

Now that the call is over, I throw my head back against my chair and groan.

I can’t believe I agreed to go out with a total stranger.

But at this point, I’m verging on the edge of desperation.

The tip of my square-toe braided sandal is touching the border and ready to dive head-first into the other side.

Knowing how long Jasmine has been waiting tugs at my heart.

It’s not her fault our family has this silly tradition and it’s certainly not her fault that I was born first. Being the younger sibling has its perks—winning the genetic lottery being one of them—but the downside is just as extreme.

But if I ever want to be the cool aunt that I know I have the potential to be one day, I need to fake it till I make it.

It’s not that I don’t want to get married—I do.

I’m a hopeless romantic despite my nerdy brain.

I love reading romances so much I joined a book club so I can gush about meet-cutes and grand gestures every Sunday night with four other bookworms. One of them, Hope, just married the love of her life over the summer, so we know happy endings do occur in real life.

But I'm pretty sure the plot line where I find a husband whom my mother likes as much as me exists solely in fiction.

"Ahem."

A low, familiar voice sounds behind me. I don't need to turn around to know which colleague is leaning all of his six-foot-four frame against my cubicle wall.

There is only one guy who smells like a citrusy forest every time he passes by, and that's Mr. Hunter Payne.

His surname is quite fitting, considering how much frustration he causes me on a daily basis when he oh-so-inconveniently stops by to brag about how fast he debugged a program or to look over my shoulder and critique a line of my code.

As if that wasn't enough, he earned a huge red flag when his cousin broke off his engagement with my friend, Amelia, and he had the gall to take Ryder's side.

Since then, I've tried to steer clear of Hunter as much as I can, but he, for some reason, won't leave me alone.

I spin around in my chair, ready to give him the stink eye, but my stomach unexpectedly dips at the sight of him.

There's something different about him today—dare I say, even kind of cute?

Is it his clothes or his shoes? Did he do something different with his hair?

I nearly gag when I realize I'm using up precious brain cells to ponder these questions.

Because there is no way I would ever be interested in Hunter.

And there is absolutely no chance at all that anything could ever happen between me and my frenemy.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

“I’m trying to become a superhero, but I can’t figure out which one... Superman or Yourman.” ~Unknown

I may not be the coolest guy on planet earth, or even in Silicon Valley, but when Lily Lam looks my way, I stand a bit straighter.

When I’m around her, I don’t mind being compared to the Jolly Green Giant, that memorable mascot who sounds like Santa but resembles Shrek.

But even though I’m nearly as tall as a giant and have been since my junior year of high school, I don’t have the legs to pull off that leafy caveman outfit he wears.

Nope, I prefer to live in jeans and a T-shirt and let beautiful people like Lily have the spotlight.

Because her legs look amazing in just about anything.

“There’s something different about you today, Hunter.” Lily eyes me cautiously, giving me a thorough onceover from my mop of chestnut brown hair all the way down to my black Vans. “I can’t quite put my finger on what it is.”

Frowning, she taps her pink-polished index finger against her lower lip and makes a humming sound that’s sweet and soothing to my soul.

Everything about Lily is like a perfect line of code, which some programmers argue

doesn't exist, but I beg to differ.

When you've experienced perfection, your brain instantly recognizes it.

Like the vibrant colors of a sunset or the harmonic tones of a major 9th chord, Lily is just as magical.

I'm pretty sure I know how Adam felt when God brought Eve to him for the first time.

Lily's the only woman who has ever rendered me speechless with a smile.

From the moment I met her on my first day of work here a year ago, I was a goner.

Literally. My thoughts vanished and I couldn't speak for a good five seconds.

I remember standing there with my mouth open like a fish out of water gasping for breath.

It wasn't until one of our colleagues walking by stuck a bagel in my mouth did I get my jaw moving again.

Fortunately, I've learned to always carry one with me when I'm near Lily, so I don't get caught in that situation again.

Day-old bagels with their drier and tougher texture are the most effective since they require more chewing.

And more chewing means I'll at least have a legitimate reason for not talking when my mind goes blank in her presence.

I swallow the last bite of the blueberry bagel in my hand, finally ready to speak now that my operating system (aka brain) has rebooted itself. “You noticed? I didn’t think you paid that much attention to me,” I add with a smirk that makes her eyes roll.

“Don’t let it go to your head, Hunter. I happen to have an eye for detail. It’s not like I keep track of what you wear every day or how you style your hair.” She cocks her head to one side and asks, “Is it your hair? Did you get it cut?”

“Nope, it’s not my hair.” I take a few steps toward her desk, enjoying every second that she has her gaze on me.

This has to be the longest that she’s ever looked my way, at least with genuine interest and not her usual displeasure.

Not that Lily’s ever mean, but her right brow always twitches when she’s bothered, which seems to happen often when I come by to chat.

It’s not my intention to annoy her though.

My sole reason for coming to work each day, other than to write awesome code and earn a paycheck, is to be relevant in Lily’s world.

Out of all the guys she works with, I want to be the one who stays on her mind.

Leave an impression, beat out the competition, and win her heart—that’s basically my three-step game plan.

As for my progress, let’s just say I’m still working on step one.

Whether the impression is good or bad is yet to be determined.

“I’m surprised you haven’t figured it out yet,” I tease her. “Any other guesses?”

“Sh! Don’t rush me.” Her eyes brighten as she exclaims, “It’s your shirt. It’s a shade darker than you usually wear. I’m right, aren’t I?”

I chuckle and shake my head. My wardrobe is as neutral and simple as Lily’s is colorful and stylish. “Good guess, but this is the same gray as all my other shirts. Try again.”

Making myself at home on the edge of her desk, I do my own onceover and take in her beauty.

Her hair is wavy today—my favorite look on her—and she has on a no-makeup makeup look that surprisingly takes the same length of time to do as a with-makeup makeup look.

Go figure, right? She’s wearing an essential black tee and a pink wraparound skirt with a ruffle hem.

I give myself a virtual pat on the back for knowing all the right terms. Before Lily, I never paid attention to fashion, and I had no idea a difference existed between boyfriend jeans and jeans worn by boyfriends.

But after watching her beauty and style videos for the past year, I’ve come to appreciate her knowledge and expertise as a part-time social media influencer.

Thanks to her and the powers of snail mucin, my skin has never looked better.

But that’s not what’s different about me today.

“Need a hint?” I ask, not bothering to hide my smug smile.

It's rare for Lily to be at a loss for words, and even rarer for me to be the reason why.

If only I could take her breath away with my dashing good looks or charming personality, like the guys in those romance books she has hidden behind her monitors.

Alas, the only sighs I seem to elicit are ones of exasperation.

She throws up her hands and shrugs. "I give up! What is it? What did you do differently today?"

I touch the index finger and thumb of each of my hands together, then place the makeshift circles over my eyes.

As soon as I do this, Lily's jaw drops. Her complexion pales, then pinkens like she's a chameleon trying to blend in with her cubicle decor.

She stares at me, unblinking and unspeaking for a long time.

So long that I'm tempted to take out the bagel from my back pocket and offer it to her.

I wave my hand in front of her face and wonder what her reaction means. "Lily? Are you okay?"

She snaps out of her trance and nods, her eyes still wide. "Y-yeah."

I immediately notice how dilated her pupils are.

Great, I've shocked her so much with this new look of mine, she's now under stress.

I don't need further proof that I made a terrible mistake wearing contacts today.

With my hands raised, I begin backing out of her cubicle slowly.

"This was obviously a bad idea. I'll go put my glasses back on?"

"What? No!" she exclaims. Using her pointer finger, she makes an imaginary circle in front of my eyes. "Don't do that. You look fine. I mean, more than fine. I just wasn't expecting this whole Clark Kent-Superman switcheroo deal."

My ears perk up as I sit back down. "Superman? You think I look like Superman?"

"I did not say that. What I mean is that I didn't think glasses, or the lack of glasses, would make such a big difference for you."

"In a good or bad way? Feel free to elaborate," I remark casually.

I'm not fishing for compliments—okay, maybe I am—but Lily's the most fashionable person I know, so her opinion means a lot to me.

If you couldn't tell by now, she means a lot to me.

"Do you think I look better with glasses or contacts?"

"Contacts," she answers without hesitation. "Not that you look bad with glasses. I just never realized how blue your eyes are. You can see them better when you wear contacts."

"Yeah? Good to know." I file this piece of information away in the virtual RAM—that's Random Access Memory—part of my brain.

My memory storage of all things Lily Lam has been growing the more I've gotten to know her.

Fortunately, she's pretty much an open book and usually says whatever's on her mind.

For some reason, though, she seems to be holding back today.

Her eye contact is off, making me wonder if she really likes this new look or if she's just being nice.

In case it's the latter, I try to play it off like I couldn't care less.

"It's not a big deal either way. I'm just trying them out to see if they're comfortable.

Can you believe it took me 35 years to get my first pair of contacts?

I've always had this irrational fear that they'd get stuck to my eyeballs and I wouldn't be able to take them out. "

"Oh, that's not irrational. It's happened to me plenty of times when I accidentally fell asleep with them in."

A chill travels down my spine. "You're kidding me, right?"

Her phone suddenly vibrates, pulling her attention away. "Sorry, I need to check this text real quick."

I grit my teeth as Lily leaves me on the brink of suspense—quite literally.

My fingers grip the edge of her desk where I'm sitting and trying my best not to fall

off.

Her last statement keeps bouncing around in my head like the ball in a pinball machine, making all sorts of lights go off.

I force my eyes to dart from the left to the right, then up and down and all around.

By the time Lily sets her phone down, I've established a fast tempo like that of a classic rock song.

"Hunter?" she asks cautiously. "What are you doing?"

"I'm keeping my eyes moving so the contacts don't have a chance of getting stuck."

Her laughter fills the space between us. "You have a bit of Clark Kent in you even without the glasses. It's good to know you're still the same Hunter Payne inside."

I pause my ocular aerobics to focus on her smile. "Did you just give me a compliment, Lil?"

She rolls her eyes again, something she does anytime I use the nickname I gave her. "You know it's an oxymoron to call me little when I'm the size of a giant."

"Not to me, you're not."

She suddenly gasps as she grabs her phone and starts typing. "I can't believe I forgot to ask how tall he is! I don't know if I can wear heels or not."

My mood quickly tanks when I realize Lily's talking about a guy. Could she possibly have a date?! "How tall who is?"

“The guy my sister set me up on a blind date with. I don’t mind if he’s shorter than me; I just don’t know if he minds me being so tall.

” She glances up, sighing. “You wouldn’t understand.

Women love guys who are tall, dark, and handsome.

But men? They all want cute and dainty girls who can practically fit in their pocket. That’s so not me.”

If my brain was a computer, the CPU—Central Processing Unit—would be working overtime trying to compute what I just heard come out of Lily’s mouth.

Did she infer that I’m the type of guy that women love?

I’d like to dwell on that possibility a little longer, but the frown on her face makes my hands clench.

I have a strong urge to take down any guy who’s ever made her believe she’s not adorable.

And by take down , I mean like in a chess match or something equally as nerdy.

“That’s not true at all,” I refute her claim.

“You are cute and dainty. There’s a reason I call you Lil. ”

Her expression softens, and for once she doesn’t seem exasperated. “Thanks for trying to make me feel better, Hunter.”

“Sure thing.” Then I ask the most important question on my mind. “So, why are you

going on this date? And where are you going, and who exactly are you going with?”

Yes, I know that’s three questions, but if I’m going to size up my competition, I need all the information I can get.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“Another fine day ruined by responsibility.” ~Unknown

“You’ve been needing a husband for the past year, and you never bothered to mention that to me?”

Apparently, Hunter has a lot more questions for me after I told him about my dilemma.

So many questions that we had to move our conversation to the company cafeteria, so we’d have a little more privacy.

You’d be surprised at how curious tech guys can be when they get wind of any sort of relationship talk.

Their brains may be hardwired to think in ones and zeroes, but their hearts still long for human connection.

That’s probably how Jasmine was able to talk those four engineers into going on a blind date with me on such short notice.

I feel triply bad that she has to now cancel on three of them.

“That’s a lot of responsibility on your shoulders. How do you feel about it? Lil?”

I glance up from my mug of pumpkin spice latte, a seasonal drink on the menu that

matches the colorful fall leaves on the trees outside the window.

My gaze connects with Hunter's across the small circular table we're sitting at, and I realize he's still waiting for me to answer.

His voice is deep and oddly soothing, an attribute I never noticed before.

I furrow my brows in wonder. First, he threw me for a loop with his sans-glasses look, and now he's acting like my therapist. How many ways can this guy surprise me today?

"Yeah, sorry. My mind's all over the place. How do I feel? Guilty and responsible and basically like the worst sister in the world."

"But is that reason enough for you to go out with a complete stranger?"

"In this situation, yes. And it's not a complete stranger. I saw his picture, so I at least know what he looks like."

"But do you know anything about him?"

"He's an engineer, so he's like us—good at math and problem solving, creative and analytical. He's probably a fan of Star Wars or Star Trek, gaming, and Legos."

"That's the surfacy stuff. What if he's a criminal or a gangster or someone who likes pineapple on their pizza?"

I balk. "What's wrong with pineapple on pizza?"

Hunter recoils in horror. "Everything's wrong with it. Who puts fruit on their pizza?"

“Everyone. Tomato is a fruit, and pizza sauce is made from tomatoes.” I quirk one brow and shoot him a “take that” look.

It’s no secret that I have a competitive streak.

Add to that the current state of life, and I’ll take all the victories I can get.

I pretend to dust my hands off as I announce, “Case closed.”

“All right, you win,” Hunter concedes with an amused grin. “I’ll have mercy on you since you’re already in such a pickle.”

I shiver as the image of me floating in a jar of acidic brine crosses my mind. “It’s kind of appropriate that you mention pickles. There’s a Chinese saying about eating vinegar?—”

“—that means you’re jealous,” he finishes for me without skipping a beat. He nods thoughtfully. “Are you jealous of your sister? It would make sense if you are.”

I don’t have time to wonder how Hunter is familiar with a Chinese idiom because I have to correct his assumption about my relationship with my sister. “I’m not jealous of Jasmine; I’m really not. I want the best for her. It’s just...”

“What?”

“There’s a tiny part of me that wishes I could be the younger sister for once. So I can throw aside my responsibilities and not have the pressure of living up to people’s expectations.” I lower my voice to a whisper and add, “I wish I could be irresponsible for just one day.”

Hunter’s eyes grow round. Either the caffeine from his cold brew has kicked in or I

just shocked him with my confession. He leans in close and whispers back, “What do you mean by irresponsible?”

“Oh, nothing crazy! I’m talking about stuff like playing hooky so I can spend the day in bed reading, or not triple checking every email for typos before I send it, or letting my mom’s calls go to voicemail once in a while without feeling guilty about it.

” A loud sigh escapes my lips. “It’s the guilt that kills me.

But Jasmine can do all these things and more without feeling bad. It’s not fair.”

“You know what your problem is?”

I swallow hard. So much for expecting sympathy from Hunter. This is one time when I wish his engineering mind wasn’t so logical. “What’s my problem?”

He opens his mouth, then shuts it. Standing to his feet, he says, “Hold on a sec.”

I watch him walk off in the direction of the line where we’d gotten our drinks.

His head appears above everyone else’s, giving me a chance to observe his interactions with other people.

Unlike a lot of the guys in our department, Hunter doesn’t shy away from conversations.

He also has no problem talking to women, many of whom are stopping to chat with him today.

I’m guessing all this extra attention is due to his new look.

I wouldn't be surprised if he gets asked out before the end of the day.

The thought leaves an unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach.

If only it was as easy for me to find love in the workplace.

It hasn't been for lack of trying. I've gone on a handful of dates since I started working here, all initiated by me.

They were casual one-on-ones, and by casual, I mean I met with those guys in this very cafeteria.

Sometimes, if we were feeling adventurous, we'd eat outside on the terrace.

We'd trade programming stories and share a slice of cake.

I'd return to my cubicle and hope for them to ask me out again, but nothing ever happens.

Sigh. Dating shouldn't be this hard, right? The problem has to lie with me. Apparently, Hunter thinks so. I tap my fingers on the table, impatiently waiting for him to return.

When he does a minute later, he sets a plate down before me. On it is a sad looking, dark brown blob. The scent of chocolate that fills my nose should make me smile, but my immediate reaction is one of confusion. "What. Is. This?"

"A brownie."

"You mean it was a brownie. I know what a brownie looks like, and this is not it. This looks like something sat on it and squished it to pieces. The poor thing is as flat

as a pancake!”

Hunter shrugs. “Are you judging the brownie based on what it looks like?”

“Of course, I am. If I asked for a brownie, I expect to get something that resembles one. ”

“Looks aren’t everything, Lil. It’s what’s on the inside that counts.” He picks up a fork, then spears a chunk of the brownie-wannabe and holds it up in front of me. “Here, try it.”

I groan, knowing exactly where he’s taking this. I’ve listened to enough self-help podcasts—most of which were recommended by my mother—to spot an analogy when I see one. “You want me to take a bite and say how good it is and that I shouldn’t judge a brownie based on its?—”

Before I can finish, he reaches across the table and sticks the piece in my mouth.

My jaw drops from shock, but I quickly clamp my lips together, so the brownie doesn’t fall out.

As soon as I do, my taste buds activate, and I start chewing to get more of the rich, decadent flavor.

The brownie’s crumbly bits are moist and chewy with a hint of sea salt.

As soon as I swallow the bite, I sit back and sigh.

I’m too far gone on my dopamine high; I can’t even get mad at Hunter for interrupting me.

“Still tastes like a brownie, doesn’t it? Case closed,” he adds, using my line from earlier. He gives me a satisfied grin before offering the fork to me. “Here, have more.”

“What do you mean by case closed?” Now that I have possession of the fork, I go to town on the brownie.

I’ve never had dessert before a meal before, but I throw caution to the wind.

If Hunter can work up the courage to try contact lenses, I can step out of my comfort zone a little, too. “This is so good.”

“There you go. It’s the same delicious brownie no matter what it looks like.

Just like you are the same amazing Lily Lam on the inside, no matter what you might be like on the outside.

Your problem is that you try so hard to be perfect, but no one can ever be.

You are allowed to be irresponsible once in a while,” he adds while making air quotes when he says that risky word that starts with an I.

I stop chewing. A lump grows in my throat that makes it hard to swallow, despite my longing for more chocolatey goodness.

This is one analogy I didn’t expect. While it sounds nice and somewhat reasonable, I can’t just give into a whim.

Every action has a reaction. Being irresponsible will only result in some kind of consequence that not only affects me but those around me.

I know Hunter means well, but he doesn't understand what it's like to be in my shoes.

Forcing the bite of brownie down, I set my fork aside and meet his gaze.

"I get what you're saying. Of course, I know the only perfect person ever to walk this earth is Jesus.

But there is such a thing as almost perfect.

It's like taking a test and scoring a 99%.

That's all I want. I know I can't be the perfect big sister a hundred percent of the time, but if I don't get married ASAP, it won't matter what else I do for Jasmine, I'll have failed her. I have failed her already."

"You're not a failure, Lil."

"Thanks for the pep talk, but it's hard not to feel like one when your sister's on the verge of tears every time she talks to you, and you know it's your fault. You know what, I should join a convent. That's the ultimate marriage, right? My parents can't argue with that."

Hunter's brows shoot up high on his forehead. "You want to become a nun?"

"Not really. Can you imagine me wearing black every day?" I joke with a small smile.

"But I am serious about finding a husband. I'll admit I haven't been putting any real effort into it.

What I need are goals. Like how I have goals for how many 'get ready with me'

videos I upload every week or how many books I read in a month.

How many men do you think I need to date in a week in order to find a husband by the end of the year? ”

“By the end of the year? That’s less than three months away!”

“Exactly. Jasmine turns thirty the day before Christmas. If I can get engaged by then, it’ll be the best birthday present ever. I won’t even need to get her anything for Christmas, even though she insists on getting two separate gifts every year.”

Hunter eyes me warily. “You’re serious about this?”

“Am I ever not serious?” I pick up my fork and start digging into the brownie again.

My appetite’s returned, along with a glimmer of hope that not all is lost. I just need to have a game plan in place.

Maybe if I take an analytical approach and research the statistics behind dating and finding a spouse, I’ll have better results.

There has to be a way for an engineer to figure this out—or even better, two engineers.

My gaze lands on Hunter and his unsuspecting blue eyes.

I’m so desperate, I don’t even hesitate when I ask, “Will you help me? Two brains are always better than one. What do you say?”

His Adam’s apple bops up and down as he swallows slowly. Then with a firm nod, he says, “My brain is at your service. Where do we start?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

“Give an engineer a problem, and they’ll give you three solutions and a spreadsheet.”

~Unknown

I got the answers to those questions I had for Lily—why she’s going on a date, where she’s going, and who she’s going with—but I also got a lot more than I’d bargained for.

“Tell me again why you’re helping the girl you like go out with other guys?

” The low voice on the other end of the phone line that’s questioning my sanity belongs to my cousin Ryder.

He and I have always been close, especially since we’re the only male cousins in our respective families—we both happen to have two older sisters.

Despite his own unsuccessful love life, he’s game for helping me with mine. “How is this a good idea?”

That’s precisely what I’ve been asking myself the past hour while Lily’s been on her date with Engineer #3.

Tucked away into a corner booth at Kirin, a Chinese restaurant in Mountain View, I have the perfect vantage point to observe her and this Simon guy who are sitting at a table about twenty feet away.

And don't worry, I am observing, not spying.

As the only non-Asian guy in this place, I couldn't be discreet even if I wanted to be.

But I do try to speak as quietly as possible, so no one assumes I'm here to crash Lily's date.

Even though that's exactly what I'd love to do.

"She asked me for help, so how could I say no?" I reply in between bites of my beef chow fun. "I'd do anything for Lily. Wouldn't you do the same for Amelia?"

He grunts instead of answering my question. Things with his ex-fiancée are a bit complicated right now, but I know Ryder still cares for her a great deal. When he starts sounding like a caveman, you know it's serious.

"I do have a plan," I continue as I pick up more food from my plate with my chopsticks.

The carrot slices I put into my mouth match the bright color of the seats and walls.

There's so much orange in this place, I couldn't see green if I tried.

But inside, I am envious. I wish I was the one sitting across from Lily, enjoying her company.

"I figure when her date goes south, I'll be right here to swoop in and save the day—er, night. "

"Wait, don't tell me you're spying on her right now?"

“It’s called observing.”

“But does she know you’re observing her?”

“Not yet.”

“So, you’re spying.”

“Or maybe I’m enjoying a good meal out, so I don’t have to cook tonight, and I happen to be at the same restaurant as Lily and her date?”

“Then you’re eating and spying.”

“All right, I’m spying.” I take a sip of chrysanthemum tea to wash down the oil from my meal. Too bad it can’t also clear my guilty conscience. “I wanted to get a look at my competition. ”

“And? What do you think?”

I crane my neck so I can see better and size up my opponent.

Simon looks like a decent guy, albeit somewhat uptight with his shirt buttoned up to his neck and a very somber expression.

I don’t understand how anyone can hold back a smile around Lily.

“It looks like someone’s forcing him to eat bitter melon. ”

“Blech. I have no idea what that tastes like, but it doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“But this is good news for me. Simon’s not her type, so that means this date will be

one and done.”

“That’s great and all, but what about the next guy? How many dates are you planning to spy on?”

“Well, based on the research Lily and I did this afternoon, she needs to go on 3.7 dates a week to increase her chances of finding a husband within three months.”

“So, that’s 44.4 dates? You’re sure going to be busy, cuz.”

As soon as I hear the total, I gasp. It’s not because I’m impressed by Ryder’s ability to crunch numbers quickly in his head—it’s in our genes because I can do the same—but by the specific number he stated.

In Chinese culture, the number four is off-limits because it sounds like the word for death .

While I’m not superstitious, I find some humor and validation in this situation.

If Lily’s dates go down in flames, I can be her hero who brings romance back to life.

After all, she already compared me to Clark Kent. I just need to keep my contacts in and play the part of Superman.

Speaking of contacts, I realize I haven’t been moving my eyeballs much during dinner. I blink, then begin scanning the restaurant from left to right and back again. That’s when I notice something new on Lily and Simon’s table, and it’s not a dish.

“Hey, cuz, I just got paged,” Ryder suddenly pipes up. “I’ll talk to you later.”

I’ve lost track of the number of times my cousin’s had to end a phone call because of

work.

It doesn't bother me, though, when I know he's literally saving lives.

His job as a doctor makes mine pale in comparison, but I feel like I'm on a mission to do a little saving tonight.

I'm ready to fly, figuratively speaking, out of my seat the instant Lily needs me.

I unfortunately can't see her face from where I'm sitting, but I do have a clear view of her date.

Simon seems to be doing a presentation, about what, I'm not sure.

All I know is that he has a laptop on the table and is scrolling through an actual slideshow, complete with pie charts and graphs.

His dark brown eyes are determined and unblinking, as if he's making the sales pitch of the century.

I wish I had super hearing so I could listen in on his spiel because I've never been more curious...

or relieved, to be honest. If he thinks he's going to win Lily's heart this way, he's got it all wrong.

I've skimmed through the romance books she reads, and I'm certain none of them include a grand PowerPoint gesture.

But it looks like Simon wants more than her heart because the next thing I know, he takes a small black box from his briefcase—yes, the guy brought a briefcase on his

date—and puts it on the table.

He slides it over towards Lily, weaving it in between a plate of Kung Pao Chicken and a dish of fried rice until it comes to a stop beside her porcelain teacup.

My heart pounds as I realize how much I underestimated Mr. PowerPoint. Simon came to win. He's asking for Lily's hand in marriage!

A dozen questions fly through my mind, all of which cause beads of sweat to break out along my temple. What kind of guy proposes on the first date? Why isn't Lily rejecting him? Is she desperate enough to marry a complete stranger? If so, what can I do about it?

Regret courses through my body like kryptonite, snuffing out the life in my veins. I squeeze my eyes shut, not caring if my contacts become permanently glued to my eyeballs. This is such an unexpected plot twist, I'm almost impressed with Simon's strategic, unromantic ways.

Will Lily be as well?

Speaking of plots, I now understand why she cries over the books she reads.

From what I know about romance stories, there's usually a black moment for a couple when they think all hope is lost. It doesn't come until after they get together, but in my case, it's happening now.

Forget dating; I won't even have a chance to tell Lily how I feel about her.

Some superhero I am.

I'm almost too afraid to look over at their table, but I force my eyelids open.

Taking a deep breath, I brace myself for the worst-case scenario—finding the woman I adore engaged to another man.

To my surprise, however, I only see Lily sitting at her table.

Simon and his briefcase are gone. I lean to the left to catch a glimpse of Lily's left hand.

My lungs finally expand again when I see her bare ring finger.

Thank You, Lord!

I'm not sure what happened or didn't happen, but I don't have time to wonder because Lily's heading over in my direction, likely on her way to the restroom.

Being the calm, cool, and level-headed guy that I am, I quickly grab the teapot and hold it in front of my face.

The expression I see reflected in the stainless steel is as sheepish as I feel.

I stay still, waiting for Lily to pass. Maybe if I hold my breath, she won't? —

“Hunter?”

—see me.

Down goes the teapot and up go my brows as I fake a tone of surprise. “Hey, Lil! What are you doing here?”

“I came here for my date like I told you I would. What are you doing here?”

My tongue freezes, not because I have no excuse to tell Lily, but because she's just so beautiful.

She has on a black dress, a color that I've never seen her wear, but her jewelry is still colorful.

Her big brown eyes look at me expectantly, waiting for an answer.

"I, um, felt like Chinese food tonight."

"Yeah? It's sort of nice that I ran into you here. You'll never believe what happened with Simon."

"Sounds intriguing." My tone is so nonchalant, I should get an Oscar. "Do you want to sit and tell me about it?"

"Yes! Let me run to the ladies' room first. Be right back!"

While Lily's doing her business, I get down to mine and ask one of the waiters to bring her food over to my table.

I also pay for her bill, so she won't need to think about that part of her evening again.

Now that Simon is out of the picture, I hope we can focus on more pressing matters, like how did he mess up and how do I not follow in his footsteps?

I'm realizing now more than ever that time is not on my side.

If I want Lily to see me as more than a friend, I'll need to make a move fast before she receives any more proposals.

When she returns and sees a clean plate and pair of chopsticks set out for her, she gives me a smile. She slides along the booth until she's seated beside me. "Thanks for letting me crash your dinner. This night totally didn't go the way I expected it to, but at least I don't have to eat alone."

Hearing the gratitude in her voice has me puffing out my chest like a male bird. I haven't done much yet, but I already feel like I'm making headway. If I need to sing, dance, or offer a gift to impress Lily, I'll consider it. But first, I want to hear all about her disastrous date.

I pour a fresh cup of tea for her, then say, "So, tell me what happened with Mr. PowerPoint."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“A blind date: An exercise in trust or an unexpected comedy special.” ~Unknown

I’m pretty sure Hunter spied on me and Simon tonight.

First of all, he just called him Mr. PowerPoint, which meant he saw the twenty-slide presentation that my date had painstakingly put together.

I’m grateful he witnessed it because I don’t think anyone would believe me if I told them Bill Gates played a part in my love life.

Or my soon-to-be nonexistent love life, to be more exact.

If the dating world is anything like what I just experienced, I’m ready to book a tour at the closest convent.

“Well, long story short, Simon proposed, and I turned him down.” I shake my head as the absurdity of my own words hits me. “What guy proposes on the first date?”

“That’s exactly what I thought! I’m glad you set him straight,” Hunter replies as he offers me some fried rice. “I bet you’re starving. You didn’t even get to take two bites before he broke out the slideshow. Here, eat. ”

“That is not an exaggeration. I lost my appetite as soon as I saw his pie charts. It should be illegal to name something that dull after a type of dessert.” I pick up my chopsticks and wait with anticipation as he piles more food onto my plate.

My stomach gurgles happily as I inhale the savory scents of soy sauce, garlic, and sesame oil.

Now this is the kind of experience I was hoping for when I showed up here.

A night out with a man who'd enjoy sharing a meal and some good conversation.

That's all I need—some nourishment for my stomach and soul.

I say a prayer of thanks to God for bringing Hunter here. "Thank you for this."

"The food? I wish I could take credit for it. I can do a lot of things, but cooking is not one of them."

"Not the food, the company. It's nice to have a normal conversation where I'm not being grilled about my 401K or cholesterol level."

His jaw drops. "Simon asked you about those things?"

"That was during the fourth and fifth slides when he was telling me about his numbers," I reply with a wry smile before I dig into the fried rice.

I'm two bites in when my taste buds start cheering.

"This is so good. At least he picked a nice restaurant. Everything else about this date, though, was a total bust. I felt like he was only interested in getting to know my credentials. I might as well have been interviewing for a job."

"You were, for the role of Mrs. PowerPoint."

"Mrs. PowerPoint—right." I roll my eyes.

“Wait, does Simon proposing mean I passed the interview? That doesn’t make sense.

He didn’t like any of the answers I gave.

I could tell because his right eyebrow kept twitching whenever I opened my mouth.

But he did mutter something about how he needed to find a wife to get an inheritance and how he was running out of time and couldn’t be choosy.

” I cringe as my self-esteem drops a few notches.

Yes, I know Psalm 139 says I’m fearfully and wonderfully made, but I can’t help wondering if I would be even more so if I were four inches shorter and more reserved.

“There was something about me that he didn’t like, but he was willing to settle. ”

“You know what that means, don’t you?”

“That he and I aren’t meant to be?”

Hunter nods. “That, and he also needs better glasses if he can’t see well enough to appreciate perfection when it’s right in front of him.”

An odd, tingling warmth fills my chest. That’s the sweetest compliment I’ve ever received, even if it’s completely false.

I study him for a moment, wondering if I’ve gotten him wrong all this time.

Maybe what I’ve been mistaking as a competitive spirit is Hunter trying to be friendly?

He really is easy to talk to when given the chance.

“That’s so gracious of you to say. But I’m not perfect by any stretch of the imagination.

If I were, I wouldn’t be in this pickle.

I’d be married already instead of going on blind dates and being questioned about how I squeeze a tube of toothpaste and hang a toilet paper roll. ”

“He didn’t...”

“Oh, yes, he did. Slide number six was about bathroom etiquette. Apparently, the proper and only way to hang TP is under.”

He balks. “Under?!”

“Right? That was my reaction, too.”

“That’s worse than putting pineapple on pizza, which could be acceptable under the right circumstances,” he adds with a sheepish grin when he sees my raised brow. “But everyone knows that TP is supposed to hang over.”

“Not, according to Simon. If you have cats, then hanging TP under is the best way because it makes it harder for cats to unroll.”

One of Hunter’s bushy brows arches. “Wow, he must love his cats. How many does he have?”

I shake my head. “None. He’s allergic to cats.”

“But he still hangs his TP under? What in the world for?”

I throw my hands up. “I. Have. No. Idea.”

Hunter bursts out with a hearty chuckle that causes the laugh lines around his eyes to deepen. “I can see why you turned down his proposal.”

“I may be desperate, but I still have some sense left. I think.” I set my chopsticks down with a loud sigh.

“You know what would solve this problem? If I could just rent a man. Maybe order one online who meets my parents’ requirements and have him show up for some dinners to convince my family that we’re engaged.

Or better yet, that we’re married. Then after Jasmine and Bruce have their wedding, we can go our separate ways. ”

Hunter also stops eating. He turns to me with wide eyes and asks, “Are you talking about getting yourself a fake husband?”

“Why? Do you know where I can find one?”

“You’re serious?”

“Am I ever?—”

“Not serious, I know,” he finishes for me with an amused smile.

“Isn’t what you’re talking about like that story where the CEO asked his assistant to pretend to be his fiancée to make his grandfather happy?”

The one where he gets loopy after a dentist appointment and does a Kermit the Frog impression. ”

I do a double take. How is it that I’ve known Hunter for a year, but I feel like I’m meeting him for the first time today? “When did you start reading rom-com?”

“I don’t. I saw the book on your desk one day and thought the cover looked interesting, so I flipped through it. Isn’t there a name for that kind of marriage? Something inconvenient?”

“No, it’s the opposite. It’s a marriage of convenience. Although inconvenient would be a better description. There’s nothing convenient about being in a contractual relationship.”

“Why do you say that? If both sides are in agreement and they both stand to gain something from it, wouldn’t that be a win-win?”

“Not if one person develops feelings for the other person and then the contract ends. That would be greatly inconvenient.”

“Why wouldn’t they just stay married?”

“Because the person who catches feelings doesn’t know for sure how the other person feels, so they never speak up about it.

At least that’s how I imagine it working out in real life.

Reality doesn’t always end with a happy ever after.

Anyhow, this is all speculation. It’s not like I’m going to find a man who’ll want to marry me temporarily. I can’t even find one to date!”

I start picking at the food on my plate again. Even my favorite dish, beef chow fun, doesn't taste so good. How can I enjoy anything, knowing that I've made zero progress on my goal of finding myself a husband? So much for my grand plan of not failing my sister.

"There's only one thing left to do," I announce to Hunter. "Something my mother suggested that I said I'd never do, but apparently never is now."

He eyes me cautiously. "What's that?"

"An arranged marriage."

He shoots me an incredulous look. "Uh, Lil, with all due respect, if you didn't want to accept a proposal from Mr. PowerPoint, what makes you think you'd be okay marrying a guy who doesn't even have a chance to give you a presentation?"

I let loose a groan from the depths of my despairing heart.

It's so loud, one of the servers comes running across the restaurant to see what's wrong.

She asks in Mandarin if we need more tea or the bill.

I can tell from the older woman's worried expression that she's hoping I say the latter, so I don't scare any customers away with my mini meltdown.

I reassure her that I'm fine, the food is fine, and everything is fine.

She doesn't seem convinced, but she does leave us alone after offering Hunter a sympathetic smile.

I feel bad for him, too. Of all the other things he could be doing after a long day of work, I'm sure consoling me was not on his list. I turn to him with a remorseful frown.

"I'm going to go. You deserve to eat your dinner in peace.

Thanks for listening and trying to help.

I'll get the check; it's the least I can do," I offer as I gather up my purse and jacket.

Before I can stand, Hunter places his hand on my arm. "Please stay, I enjoy your company. And the bill's been paid for, including the one for you and Simon, so don't worry about it."

"When did you—" I stare at him in disbelief. "Why would you pay for our bill? That wasn't your mess to clean up."

He shrugs like it was no big deal. "Haven't you heard of the multiple table discount at Chinese restaurants? I wanted to get my money's worth."

Hunter's joking tone has me smiling despite my sour mood.

I wish I could take back all the petty things I've ever thought about him.

He's so good-natured, much more than I am, especially when my kindness half the time is about being ke qi .

That's the Chinese art of being nice—extreme politeness for the sake of saving face.

Hunter, on the other hand, genuinely cares about people.

And for some reason, he's decided to grace me with his kindness.

"Thanks, Hunter. You're a really good coworker—and friend," I add, deciding to move our relationship to the next level. "Next time, it's my treat."

"I'd like that."

We sit in amiable silence for a few minutes as we enjoy more of the delicious food.

In between bites, I find myself sneaking peeks at Hunter out of the corner of my eye.

He looks more dressed up than usual with a black leather jacket over a button-down shirt.

The outfit is trendier than office attire, especially with his hair combed back.

His baby blues are on full display, making my inner teen squeal with delight.

Hunter's the kind of guy I would have asked out back in high school when I was going through what my parents called my "rebellious phase." The only difference is that he's not the bad boy type that I secretly liked.

He actually has a heart of gold that makes his outward appearance even more attractive.

If Hunter Payne was Chinese, he'd be the first man I'd consider having a marriage of convenience with.

Whoa. I shiver inadvertently as the thought bounces around in my mind.

How did I go in a single day from being annoyed with my coworker to thinking about

marrying him?

! I'm pretty sure my last ounce of sense has just done an Elvis and left the building.

But the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that he's my best choice.

He has the Cs that I'd want in a husband—Christian, caring, and compassionate.

It doesn't hurt that he's cute, too. And he has the things that are important to my parents, like a career, condo, and cash.

The only thing missing is him being Chinese, which is the least of my worries.

Honestly, Hunter is the whole package and maybe the solution to my dilemma.

The question now is how do I bring up this idea without getting Hunter all shook up or leaving me in the heartbreak hotel?

I swallow hard, then square my shoulders. With a hopeful smile, I present my proposal to him. "Is there a chance you enjoy my company so much, you wouldn't mind getting married?"

His ears turn bright red, leaving me wondering if I just made the worst decision of my life.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

“Kindness is free. Sprinkle that stuff everywhere.” ~Unknown

Did Lily Lam just propose to me?

“What did you say?” My heart’s pounding in my chest like the booming of a bass drum, setting the mood for this suspenseful conversation. “Are you asking me what I think you just asked me?”

“What do you think I just asked you?” Her tone is tentative, and she has a hard time maintaining eye contact. “You know what? I take it back. Let’s pretend I didn’t say anything. This night’s already gone sideways. It’d be best if I kept my thoughts to myself.”

I frown, seeing Lily be so unsure of herself.

This is a woman who can hold her own in a room full of colleagues, most of whom are men.

She’s often the first to offer a solution that no one else thought of and is one of the last people on the team to leave the office when there’s a project due.

Besides having a strong work ethic, she’s also a great friend.

I’ve heard her on the phone with her friends, listening and giving them advice.

And it's impressive how hard she tries to be a good sister, even to the point of asking a random guy to marry her.

Given that the random guy is me, maybe she's just desperate.

Desperate or not, I'm not foolish enough to pass up an opportunity when I see one.

"I want to hear them, your thoughts," I say to Lily. "Are you talking about us pretending to be married or us having an actual marriage of inconvenience?"

Her expression softens enough for her to crack a small smile. "It's marriage of convenience. And I can't believe you're entertaining my wild idea."

"Call me Sir Wild. I was known to do a wild thing or two in my younger days."

"How wild are we talking about?"

"When I was two, I went down the tallest slide at the park, head first, and ended up with four stitches right here." I tilt my head in her direction and point to an area around my hairline.

"Then when I was thirteen, I crashed into the same slide on my skateboard and had to get a few more stitches on my backside. I'll spare you the visual for that one."

Nodding quickly, she says, "I'll take your word for it."

"So, I'm all for wild ideas. We only have one life to live. Might as well make the most of the time that God's given us."

Her brows quirk as she regards me. "You know something? You're full of surprises. Or maybe I didn't know the real you before today."

“This works out perfectly then. What better way to get to know someone than to marry them, right?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“When am I not serious?” I joke, using her trademark line.

My tone is lighthearted, but I decide to switch gears.

This is a big deal to Lily and not something to joke about, even though humor is what I fall back on when I’m nervous.

And boy, am I nervous. I think I’m about to make the biggest decision of my life.

But then I take one look at Lily’s downcast face and all my nerves fade away.

Lily’s not the only one being surprised today.

I feel like I’m discovering bits and pieces of her that she usually keeps hidden.

Like a blooming onion appetizer that’s served in restaurants, this woman has so many layers to peel back.

Underneath her stylish clothes and pretty hair and makeup, she has a soft and delicate heart.

Having her reveal her insecurities to me makes me want to go into caveman mode—to grunt and brandish my club—so I can protect her.

But since we’re living in civilized times, I’ll be a gentleman and give her a proper offer.

Because spending time with her is as satisfying as eating that deep-fried, savory goodness, and I only want more.

“However way you want to do it, Lil, I’m game. I will marry you.”

The next few seconds pass by in silence as Lily’s deep brown eyes stare up at me.

I can almost see the wheels turning in her head as she considers the ramifications of my words.

Her expression is more thoughtful now, as if she’s working out the details in her mind.

Whatever said details are, I’m eager to find out.

She gives me a questioning glance and asks, “Why do you want to help me, Hunter? I haven’t exactly gone out of my way to be nice to you.

I’m not always patient or friendly when you try to talk to me.

I know you’re a good guy, but this goes beyond a regular act of kindness—way beyond.

Why in the world would you agree to do this? ”

Her confusion throws me for a loop. Does Lily honestly not know how I feel about her?

Even though I haven’t expressed my interest out loud, I thought she’d have gotten a clue by now based on how often I visit her cubicle.

Apparently, my unspoken rizz has been loudly ineffective.

Since she doesn't realize how much I like her, I give her a platonic answer.

"You know the second greatest commandment. I'm trying to love my neighbor as myself. "

Her eyes brighten. "That's how I feel about helping my sister.

I know she'd do this for me if we were in each other's place.

Loving someone isn't only about how they make you feel but also how you make them feel.

True love involves sacrifice, right? I may make a stink when Jasmine borrows my clothes without asking, but I'd do anything for her.

I literally prayed for a sibling, and God gave her to me.

She's one of the best gifts I could've asked for. "

If I thought I couldn't like Lily more, I was wrong. Hearing her talk like this shows me how big her heart is. "You're an amazing sister, you know that? My sisters could take a lesson from you. I'm pretty sure neither one of them would marry a stranger for my sake."

"You're not a stranger. I've known you for a year and I've seen your presentations at work—the thought you put into your color schemes is quite impressive. And we agree on the most important thing, that TP should hang over, not under."

"For sure." I chuckle along with her. "It's a deal then. All we need to do now is to

talk about logistics.”

“Logistics—right.” She looks off into the distance for a moment, then turns back to me.

“How about this? We can pretend to be engaged, and I’ll introduce you to my family.

I’ll talk my mom into letting Jasmine set a wedding date so she can book the venue and send out invitations.

Then we can amicably break up before the wedding, so you won’t have to meet my extended family. Does that sound okay with you?”

Okay? An amicable breakup is an oxymoron if I’ve ever heard of one.

I want to shake my head so vigorously my contacts might fall out, but I nod instead.

I’m grateful for this opportunity to be Lily’s fiancé, even if it’s pretend.

Because once she gets a taste of what it’s like to be in a relationship with me, she’ll wish it were real.

At least that’s my plan. I don’t have any experience being engaged, but I am a professional when it comes to crushing on Lily Lam. You could call me the unofficial president of her fan club.

A fan club of only one, I hope.

“That sounds fine,” I readily agree. “A pretend engagement shouldn’t be hard to pull off. We already see each other five days out of the week. This will be an extension of our relationship outside of the office.”

“Exactly. We technically already have a meet-cute to tell people about.”

“A meet what?”

“A meet-cute. The scene when a couple first meets that’s usually cute, hence the name, or it can be funny or awkward. I guess for us it would be more of the latter.”

I cringe, wishing I could redo our first meeting. “Oh yeah, that was completely my fault.”

“Your fault? No way. It was so rude of the new intern to stuff a bagel in your mouth. You turned as red as a tomato, especially your ears. I actually thought about doing the Heimlich on you.”

“You did?”

“Of course. Death by bagel does kind of have a nice ring to it, but it would be a horrible way to go.”

“True.” Or maybe not. I won’t lie—the thought of Lily wrapping her arms around my torso and squeezing me tight kind of makes me wish I’d choked that day.

Hopefully I won’t have to put my life in danger to experience being that close to her.

Speaking of danger, I see some red flags in her plan that we need to talk about.

“You said you’re going to talk your mom into letting your sister set a wedding date and send out invitations.

What do we say when they ask about our wedding plans?

I thought the whole point was for you to get married first? ”

She nods thoughtfully. “That’s a valid point. The thing is... how do I put this? My parents, especially my mom, won’t be easy to deal with. They’re going to have some concerns when they meet you.”

“What do you mean?” Her ominous tone sends a shiver down my spine. “They don’t force prospective sons-in-law to eat pineapple on their pizza, do they?”

She smirks. “Not that I know of, but they do have a list of requirements for what they want in a son-in-law. Unfortunately, you meet all of them except for one.”

“Which one?” It’s not beneath me to work on myself if it will earn me brownie points with Lily’s parents. “I’m open to changing.”

“This isn’t something you can change.”

“Try me.”

“They want me to marry a Chinese guy.”

“Oh.” My insides twist into a tangled knot.

Forget red flags, we’ve just entered sirens and flares territory.

I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised about this requirement, given what I’ve learned about Chinese culture, but it’s still hard to swallow.

Forcing out a smile, I joke, “And I thought being forced to eat pineapple on pizza would be hard to beat.”

“Yeah.” She sighs, her expression pained. “It’s a silly requirement and not fair at all, if you ask me. I wish it wasn’t like this.”

“So, how is it going to work then? How do I get their blessing?” Our engagement may be pretend, but my question is as real as can be. I have faith that God can do the impossible. I’ve seen Him change hearts before.

“Well, I’m hoping that once they meet you and see what a good guy you are, they’ll bend the rules. They’ll have to approve of your heart.”

I’d like to bask in the glow of Lily’s compliment, but I can’t shake the concern tightening my chest. “That’s kind of you to say, Lil, but what if they don’t?”

“I guess the next step then would be to elope.”

“Elope?” I can’t tell if she’s being serious, but I’m afraid to ask. It’s one thing to agree to marry her, but another thing to cross her parents by eloping. I’m pretty sure I’d never earn their trust and respect that way.

“Don’t worry,” Lily says, “I’m kidding. My mom would never forgive me if I didn’t give her the chance to throw a ten-table wedding banquet. We’ll cross that path if—when—we come to it. For now, let’s focus on you meeting them first. It’s like writing code. We’ll take it one line at a time.”

One line at a time—right. I can write code in my sleep, but meeting my fake fiancée’s parents? I’m going to need a crash course for that.

It’s time to call in the experts on Chinese culture—my parents.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“Obviously, if I was serious about having a relationship with someone long-term, the last people I would introduce him to would be my family.” ~Chelsea Handler

“Eloping doesn’t seem like such a bad idea right now,” I murmur to Jasmine under my breath.

“You can still escape, Jie. It’s not too late.” She gestures over her shoulder. We exchange cringe-filled looks as we hide in the far corner of Pearl Bay, an upscale Chinese restaurant that serves dim sum for lunch. “I’ll create a diversion while you sneak out the back door.”

“You know I’d have to go into the witness protection program if I did that.

Ma would never forgive me.” I slump against the wall, not even caring that my blouse is getting wrinkled.

My gaze flits over to the large fish tanks beside us and their unsuspecting seafood residents.

The poor fish and crabs have no idea they’re the ones on the menu, just like I had no clue my mother was going to turn our casual meal into a glorified engagement party.

And I’m the one who’s about to be fed to the wolves—aka my Chinese aunties.

“I should’ve known something was fishy when we walked in here and a third of the

restaurant was empty. That never happens on a Saturday.”

Jasmine nods. “Right? I have no idea how Ma was able to reserve five tables so last minute. Or how she got so many of our relatives to come. You only told her about Hunter yesterday!”

“Never underestimate our mother. When she wants something done, any-fin is possible.”

“Uh-oh. You’re talking in puns. You only do this when you’re stressed out.” Her perfect brows furrow as she sighs. “Are you sure about this, Jie? I don’t want you to marry a random guy just so I can start planning my wedding. It’s not worth it.”

“Hunter’s not a random guy, he’s my coworker. And it will be so worth it to finally see you and Bruce get married. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I am fine,” I reassure her and myself. “I’m more than fine. I’m fin-tastic, just fin-tastic.”

“Yikes.” She shakes her head, giving me a pitying look. “That’s two puns in the last minute.”

“Three,” I correct her. “You missed the first one where I said something was fishy.”

She rolls her eyes. “Right.”

“And here’s number four—I’m going to be o-fish-ally cooked when Hunter shows up and Ma and Ba discover he’s not Chinese.

I thought it’d be safer for them to meet in a public place, in case Ma starts getting dramatic, but I didn’t think we’d have an audience.

But, then again, this could be a good thing!

” I straighten my posture and stand to my feet, no longer needing the wall for moral support.

A wave of relief washes over me as I tell Jasmine, “Ma can’t very well admit to her sisters that she had no idea I went against her wishes.

She’ll be so concerned about saving face, she’ll have to hold herself together.

At least she’ll save her guilt trips for later when we’re alone. ”

Jasmine gasps. “You’re right! Maybe we should call up some of their church friends and neighbors, too. The more witnesses, the better, right?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. I think we’re good.” Apparently, my sister inherited all the efficiency genes from our mother. She’s already scrolling through the contacts in her phone to find people to add to our guest list. “I don’t think Ma would appreciate paying for any more tables.”

“Good point. But they could stand outside and press their faces against the glass.” She smirks, pointing to the large floor to ceiling windows that look out into the parking lot of the strip mall.

Her expression softens as she clasps her hands over her chest. “Oh, Bruce is here! Who’s that tall guy he’s talking to? ”

My gaze follows hers until it lands on two men walking past the restaurant windows.

They look to be deep in conversation, with Bruce doing most of the talking.

The guy Jasmine’s asking about is none other than Hunter, my fake fiancé.

Let me say that in all caps because it bears repeating. HUNTER PAYNE IS MY FAKE FIANCÉ!

Cold beads of sweat break out on my forehead as I realize it's showtime. I swallow hard and utter, "That's him. My fi...fi..."

"Your fifi? What's a fifi?"

"No! My fi..." The mouth refuses to cooperate, so I spit out, "Him. Hunter."

"That's your fiancé?!" Jasmine now resembles one of the fish in the tank with her mouth agape and eyes bugged out. "You didn't tell me he's so handsome!"

"Is he?"

"I can't believe Bruce got to meet him before me!

" She tugs on my arm as she practically drags me toward the entrance.

Thankfully, we're able to sneak along the walls of the opposite end of the restaurant from where our family is sitting.

"Come on, I need to get a closer look at your hunky hubby-to-be!"

Hunky? I've never thought of my goofy coworker as a hunk before, but I suppose he has a few things going in his favor.

Now that I've seen a couple of his outfits outside of work, I'll admit he has an impressive fashion sense for an engineer—no offense to my fellow Code Crafters.

Today, he's wearing a blue sport coat that shows off his broad shoulders and his hair

is combed to the side, à la Clark Kent.

He's also sans-glasses again, so I can see the sparkle in his baby blues the moment our eyes lock through the glass pane of the front door.

My stomach does a weird flip that I chalk up to nerves because I suddenly realize I did not think this plan through.

For someone who prides herself on being good with details, I left out a dozen of them, all of which are necessary if we're going to pull off this heist.

Yep, this fake engagement now feels like a robbery because I've most definitely lost my wits.

Pushing open the door, I rush outside and greet Hunter with a forced smile. "Hey! I need to talk to you before we go inside."

"Sure thing, my precious."

My precious?! Before I can question his choice of words, my sister pulls him into a hug.

"Welcome to the family, Hunt! Can I call you Hunt? Oh wow, you're tall. Isn't he tall, honey?" Jasmine directs her question at Bruce whose head bounces up and down like a Bobblehead. "Bruce and I are thrilled for you and Lily. So thrilled! You're making our wishes come true!"

"Didn't I say Jasmine would be thrilled to meet you?"

"Bruce beams like he's accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, which could very well be in his future given how brilliant he is.

But for now, he's soaking up all of Jasmine's adoration.

"You showed up in the nick of time, Hunter. Like I was about to tell you, my grandparents are getting up there in age and their greatest wish is to attend their only grandson's wedding.

They'll finally get to see their wish come true, and it's all because of you. "

"You don't say." Hunter tugs at his shirt collar and laughs nervously. "That's no pressure at all."

"You'll be fine," Jasmine pipes up. "It's good you're meeting our parents for the first time in public. Now if our mom offers to meet up with you later in a dark alley, I'd start worrying. Come on, Bruce! We're going to head in first, Jie! See you inside!"

As soon as the lovebirds are gone, I pull Hunter a few feet over to a brick wall where we'll be safe from prying eyes inside the restaurant. There's so much to go over with him, I don't know where to start. "So, um, about this lunch..."

"Yes, Lil?"

Hearing him call me Lil makes my anxiety drop a few notches.

There's an almost hypnotic quality to his smooth-as-melted-chocolate voice, but it's also the fact that he's acting like his usual self.

The Hunter I know from the office is approachable and dependable and he doesn't call me nicknames like my precious . The topic of terms of endearment shoots straight to the top of my list of things to discuss. "I realized we didn't go over some important things, like pet names. I'm okay if you want to stick with Lil, but my precious is a bit... "

“Too much like Gollum?” he asks. “I didn’t even try saying it in his voice yet . But, okay, no more my precious . How about darling or sweetheart or baby? I figure we should say and do some couple-y things to look more believable.”

“We probably should, but let’s not do anything cheesy. I’m lactose intolerant in more ways than one.”

“You’re funny, too.” He grins in amusement. “Okay, fair enough. Nothing cheesy. What about physical affection? Are you okay with holding hands? Hugs? Any intolerances I should know about for that?”

I shudder involuntarily. “Oh, no no no. I’m not a touchy person at all. In our family, we don’t do any kind of affection, physical or otherwise. It’s a cultural thing. Actually, that’s not completely true. Chinese parents do show they care by their actions.”

“Like cutting fruit for you or asking if you’ve eaten yet,” Hunter states matter-of-factly.

“Um, yes. How did you know that? Have you dated a Chinese girl before?”

“No, I just did some research.” He holds up a red gift bag that I hadn’t noticed him carrying before. “Said research also taught me to bring a gift as a sign of respect.”

“You got a gift for my parents?”

He nods. “I came prepared. It’s not every day you meet your fiancée’s parents who happen to be from a different culture than your own. And I do mean that literally. I only have one set of parents to meet since I only have one fiancée, in case you were wondering,” he adds in a playful tone.

“I wasn’t, but thanks for clarifying.” I can’t help but smile.

I’m not sure how things changed so much in such a short amount of time, but Hunter’s growing on me.

His jokes, as silly as they are, make me roll my eyes in a good way.

And his heart is beyond generous. I can’t believe he prepared for this lunch—oh, the lunch!

I’m so impressed with my fake fiancé’s efforts, I nearly forgot what’s waiting for him on the other side of this wall.

I take a deep breath, then start my crash course on the Lam fam.

“Like I was saying about this lunch, there are a lot more people here than I thought there would be.”

“Oh? Like how many more?”

“Well, my mom’s the oldest of four, so my three aunties and their husbands are here.

Then there’s my dad’s side. He has an older and younger sister, so that’s two more aunties and their husbands.

Then there’s my mom’s cousins, five of them from her mom’s side and three from her dad’s, and all their spouses.

And her four best friends from college, who are like honorary aunties to me, and their husbands.

Oh, and a handful of other people my mom says have helped me get to where I am in life, including my piano teacher, the superintendent of the Chinese school I attended, and my SAT tutor. I think that's everyone."

When I'm done spouting off the guest list, Hunter has stopped blinking. His pupils, however, have grown so much that they almost eclipse his blue irises. I wave my hand in front of his eyes, wondering if his contacts have gotten stuck. "Hunter? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he squeaks out in a strangled voice. "I've never been better for someone who's about to meet over four dozen strangers who will be watching my every move."

I wince at the truth of his words. Guilt weighs down on me, knowing that I'm the reason Hunter's going to feel more charred than barbecue meat after all the grilling he'll be going through.

My eyes lock onto his as I give him an offer he can't refuse.

"Leave, Hunter. You don't have to go through with this.

I'm sure you have better things to do on a Saturday than face a bunch of overly-enthusiastic Chinese aunties. Hurry and go while you can."

His jaw drops. "You're dumping me, Lil? We haven't even been engaged for a day yet, and you want to call it off?"

I balk. "I'm not dumping you; I'm setting you free.

I appreciate you trying to help me, but this whole thing is my mess; you shouldn't have to suffer because of me.

I'll find a way to deal with it. Maybe I'll call Simon up and see if he'll give me another chance to finish his presentation.

Or I can go out with the three other guys Jasmine found.

The odds of me finding a husband go up the more I date, right? I just need to try harder."

Hunter shakes his head. "Trust me, Lil, the only suffering I'm going through is hunger pains, imagining all the good food that's waiting for us inside.

I'm not going anywhere. I said I'll help you and I'm going to see this through to the end.

Also, I'm slightly offended that you think I can't hold my own against some well-meaning aunts. Aunts love me."

The sincerity in his voice makes me tear up while his humor draws laughter out of me. "I don't know what I did to deserve a friend like you. Thank you."

My heart swells with so much gratitude, I want to show him tangibly how much I appreciate him.

The next thing I know, I'm launching myself at Hunter and throwing my arms around him.

He's so tall, my face gets buried in his neck where I get a good whiff of his unique scent.

The woody, spicy notes of his cologne, along with a fresh soap fragrance, smell so good, my heart does a little flip of happiness.

This reaction surprises me because for someone who doesn't do hugs, I find myself enjoying this one a lot...

and I don't quite know what to make of it.

Could I be developing feelings for my fake fiancé?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor. I need someone who will laugh at my bad puns.” ~Unknown

I was wrong. I’m suffering from a lot more than hunger pains with Lily’s arms wrapped around me.

Every cell in my body wants to pull her flush against me and hold her tight, but I exert what little self-control I have left and keep my hands at my side.

Despite my name, I vow to be a gentleman around my pretend fiancée because that’s all that this is—pretend.

I hold my breath, trying not to inhale the sweet, floral scent of her perfume, and also ignore how soft her hair is.

It takes every bit of willpower—along with a prayer—to not be affected, but boy, am I a lost cause.

It’s a good thing Lily’s strong because she’s the only thing holding me up right now.

I’m a numbers and logic kind of guy, but nothing about this situation makes sense. How does something as seemingly harmless as a hug have the power to make my head spin? But this isn’t just any hug, it’s a Lily Lam hug. And in her hands, I’m as soft and malleable as a marshmallow .

She suddenly pulls back and apologizes. “Sorry about that. I don’t know what came over me just now. I’m not a touchy person. It must be all the adrenaline rushing through me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not opposed to hugs,” I reassure Lily.

Her cheeks are pink with embarrassment, but honestly, the tinge only accentuates her beauty.

I’m relieved to see her back to wearing colors today instead of black.

Her dark orange dress skims the top of her knees and shows off her shapely legs.

I give myself a virtual pat on the back for choosing an outfit that complements hers, or at least I hope it does.

“Am I dressed okay? I know red is considered a lucky color in Chinese culture, but I wasn’t sure if this was the right occasion for it. ”

“Red is usually for weddings or Chinese New Year. You look great. I never realized how good your fashion sense is.”

“I can’t take all the credit. I did get some help from my sisters. They live on the east coast, but we do a video call every Saturday morning to catch up. It worked out for me to ask them for advice today.”

“That’s sweet of them. How many sisters do you have?”

“Two. They’re both older, one by eight years and the other by five.”

Her brows shoot up. “I don’t know anything about your family! What about your

parents? What do they do?”

“My dad’s an engineer and my mom’s a preschool teacher. How about your parents?”

“My dad’s a dentist and my mom helps him with the front office.”

“Nice. Does that mean we get free exams and cleaning? Not that that’s the main reason why I’m marrying you,” I add with a grin, “but it would be a cool perk.”

“Let’s see what they think of you first before we let my dad near your mouth with a scaler. ”

I gulp. Lily’s expression and tone are both so somber, my palms start to sweat.

I’m already a scaredy cat when it comes to seeing the dentist; I certainly don’t need to get on the bad side of one.

I can feel the tips of my ears growing hot, something they do when I’m embarrassed or nervous or feeling any kind of strong emotion.

They unfortunately act like antennas, sending out an SOS signal for all the world to see.

Lily’s radar must pick up on my mood because she rushes on to say, “Hunter, I’m joking.

My dad’s the calm one in the family. If there’s anyone you need to be worried about, it’s my mom, but she thankfully doesn’t have access to the dental equipment.

” She pauses to study me for a moment, her lips pursed. “Did you know your ears light up?”

“Light up? I know they turn red, but I didn’t think there was any electricity involved.”

She laughs. “That’s what I meant. It’s kind of impressive how your face stays the same color, but your ears don’t. If you were wearing a hat or earmuffs, no one would ever guess you were scared.”

I scoff. “Who said I’m scared? I am not scared of dentists, the dark, or pretty girls, obviously,” I add with a nod in her direction. Her brows furrow like she doesn’t understand what I’m referring to. “They’re lyrics. From the song ‘Riptide’ by Vance Joy.”

“Ohhh! No wonder that sounded familiar.”

She proceeds to sing the first few lines of the song, and I jump in and harmonize with her. The two of us exchange big smiles by the time we reach the end of the first verse.

“Wow!” She gives me an enthusiastic high five. “We don’t sound too bad together.”

“Too bad? Try amazing and awesome. I’m so glad you’re musical.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m Asian. Most Asians either know how to play the piano or violin or according to my mom, both if you’re blessed enough.

Guess who was doubly blessed?” she adds as she points to herself.

“I always wanted to learn the drums, but my mom didn’t approve.

Maybe someday I’ll find the time to take lessons. ”

My entire body relaxes. Any fear or worry I’d had has completely disappeared.

This conversation is music to my ears—literally and figuratively.

The more I learn about Lily, the more excited I am to be a part of her life.

“It’s your lucky day because I happen to know how to play the drums. I’ll teach you.”

“No way! I’d love that.” Her eyes linger on my face as she sighs.

The sound is like one you’d expect from a hungry man staring at a piece of steak that’s not his—full of yearning and regret.

She blinks, then shifts her gaze to the restaurant entrance.

“Come on. It’s time to go inside and face the music, no matter what treble lies ahead of us.”

“Did you just make a music pun?”

“Yeah, it’s something I do when I’m stressed. Just ignore me.”

“Why would I do that?” I walk ahead of her and open the door. “I love puns.”

She glances at me over her shoulder with that look of longing again. “Of course you do.”

Her remark confuses me, but there’s no time to ask for clarification because we are soon surrounded by dozens of middle-aged Chinese women.

A petite one with the same oval face shape and dark brown eyes as Lily approaches me first. As she examines me, her brows furrow in the familiar way that Lily’s does

whenever I interrupt her at work.

She points a finger at me, then glances at Lily with a disapproving shake of her head.

“What month is it?” she asks Lily .

“What month is it?” Lily repeats, looking confused. “It’s October.”

“Then why are you playing an April Fool’s joke on me?” Mama Lam clutches her chest dramatically as if she’s about to faint. “Why did you bring him instead of your fiancé?”

“Ma, this is my fiancé. This is Hunter.”

“Wah!” the group of aunties exclaim in unison before they receive a death glare from their ringleader, Mrs. Lam. One by one, they quiet down and become a captive audience again.

“Ma,” Lily pleads, “please give Hunter a chance. He’s a wonderful man. You just need to get to know him.”

My chest puffs out in response to Lily’s compliment, but just as quickly, it deflates with one wary glance from her mom. It’s impressive how much power this petite woman wields with her eyebrows. Even though I tower over her by more than a foot, she has me frozen in fear.

But I can’t give in. There’s a lot on the line, not just with pulling off this ruse with Lily, but also my potential future with her.

It’s time to step up my game, regardless of whether the playing field is even.

My fight or flight response kicks in, and I extend my hands.

With a deep bow, I present my gift to Mama Lam and greet her with a hearty, “Ah yi, nin hao!”

A collective gasp goes up around us, not only from the aunties but from Lily, too. She stares at me in shock like she can’t believe I just said hello to her mom in Mandarin. More than that, I called her auntie to emphasize her youthfulness and also used the formal version of you to show respect.

What can I say, I have a few tricks up my sleeve. Okay, it’s literally one trick, but it’s a good one, I think.

Mama Lam tilts her chin up and down, giving me a thorough onceover.

Her expression remains stoic. She must be a master at playing poker, or probably more likely, at mahjong.

The only thing I can spot on her face is skepticism, and a lot of it.

She clears her throat and takes the gift from my hands, then attempts to peek inside the bag out of the corner of her eye.

Not even two seconds pass before her dark brown eyes light up and she turns into a child on Christmas morning.

“Wah!” she exclaims as she pulls out a large container of dried abalone and sea cucumber.

The aunties crowd around her, pressing in from all sides to get a closer look.

One would think she was Gollum holding a precious ring in her hands.

Mama Lam nods and offers me a look full of curiosity.

“How did you get this? It’s been sold out every time I try to buy it. ”

“I have a friend who knows someone,” I explain in Mandarin. “I’m glad you like it. If you ever want more, just let me know.”

All the aunties around us start talking amongst themselves about my language skills and knowledge of Chinese culture. My ears heat up to hear all their compliments, but Mama Lam keeps her cool and tilts her chin up proudly.

“Of course he is an excellent choice,” she touts without missing a beat. “I taught my daughters to only choose the best.”

Lily’s brows shoot up in surprise at her mother’s change of heart.

Mrs. Lam turns to me and asks, “And how do you know how to speak Mandarin so well? You speak better than Lily.”

Lily balks. “Really, Ma? I suffered through twelve years of Chinese school.”

“And you still have an accent.”

“That’s because I’m out of practice. Other than you and Ba, I have no one to talk to in Mandarin.”

“Not anymore.” Mama Lam nods in my direction. “You have Hunter, your fiancé.”

Lily and I exchange wide-eyed, jaw-dropping looks. Does this mean I’ve been

welcomed into the Lam Family?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“Love is when you meet someone who tells you something new about yourself.”

~André Breton

Miracles do happen.

I don't know how Hunter did it, but he managed to win my wonderfully stubborn and strongheaded mother over.

After our lunch with the family, which included an extensive interview that Hunter passed with flying colors—I'm now convinced he's really Superman—both of my parents sent us off with their blessings.

It's now two days later, we're out of the office on a boba tea break, and I still can't get over how God answered my prayers.

“How did I not know your parents were missionaries in Taiwan and that you were born there?” I ask Hunter who's studying the menu displayed on the monitor over the buy counter as we wait in line.

“And you lived there for the first nine years of your life? No wonder you're practically fluent in Mandarin! ”

He shrugs and shoots me a sheepish grin. “You never asked.”

I roll my eyes at his attempt to be cute.

Never mind that it's working—the corners of his eyes crinkle in such an adorable way whenever he smiles—but I am not amused.

Relieved? Yes. Amused? Not quite. “You could have mentioned it before you met my parents. It would've been a lot less nerve-wracking if I'd known about your superpower.”

“And ruin the surprise? No way. It was priceless seeing your reaction.” He raises his brows and drops his jaw, looking like the shocked face emoji. “I told you I was prepared for the meeting.”

“You weren't only prepared; you blew everyone's mind. It was like the story in Numbers where God made the donkey talk to its owner. Hearing you speak Mandarin for the first time was almost as unbelievable.”

He cocks his head. “Are you comparing me to a donkey now?”

“No, silly, just the situation. It was nothing short of a miracle, I tell you. I never, ever in a million years imagined my mom would approve of me marrying someone who's not Chinese.”

“Well, miracles do happen. And God isn't bound by time, so a million years doesn't count for much from His point of view.”

I blink in surprise. Something about his answer makes my insides flutter. What can I say? I'm a gal who appreciates it when a guy talks theology to me. I love that Hunter is kind and smart. “That is such a geeky yet logical answer.”

“That's me, geeky and logical.”

“You say that like it's a bad thing. Geeky and logical guys are kind of h—cool.”

“Huh-cool? Is that a new slang word? ”

I quickly shake my head. I’m not about to admit that I almost called Hunter hot. “No, I had a little tickle in my throat.”

His gaze softens with concern. “Your cheeks are flushed. I hope you’re not getting sick.”

“No, I’m fine. It’s probably something to do with the weather cooling down.

I should’ve worn more.” I cross my arms over my cream-colored blouse that I paired with a leopard print skirt.

Goosebumps form along my skin, which could be due to the strong air conditioning in this shop or a reaction to Hunter taking off his jacket.

I never paid much attention to his broad shoulders before, but now I can’t stop staring.

With Hunter next to me, I feel extra girly, even dainty.

Not like a damsel in distress, but a woman who doesn’t mind being desired and doted on.

The thought is so foreign to my brain, I quickly squash it.

I’ve learned to be strong and independent, someone who can hold her own in a department full of men.

I don’t know what to do with this reimagined identity of mine, but part of me likes it.

I like who I am when I'm with Hunter.

"Here, take this." His deep voice echoes in my ear as he leans over and places his jacket on my shoulders. "You have goosebumps all over your arms."

"Nothing gets past you, does it?" I murmur with chagrin. "Thank you."

"It's these contact lenses; they work wonders. They help me see a lot better." He gestures to the menu as we step up to order, "What would you like, Lil? My treat."

"Oh, you go ahead. I'll order on my own."

"I insist. I'd like to treat my fiancée to tea."

"Thanks, but I've got it?—"

"Girl, why are you refusing him?!" The barista, who looks like a recent college grad, glares at me as if I asked for a boba tea without the boba.

She shakes her purple-dyed hair and sighs.

"You don't know how good you have it. The rest of us are out here swiping left, just praying for a guy who wants to take care of us, while you're here denying your man the opportunity? Please let him buy you a drink."

Hunter grins and gives the barista a high five. "Well said, thank you. So, Lil, what would you like?"

What would I like? Maybe for my stomach to stop dipping every time I breathe in the scent of Hunter's cologne that lingers on his jacket.

And for this fake relationship to stop messing with my head.

The more time I spend with him, the more I realize how amazing he is—he plays the drums and loves puns?

!—, how I’m not good enough for him, and how much I need to focus on the facts.

What I—and apparently the barista—need is a reality check.

“Thanks for the pep talk,” I say to her, “but he’s not really my fiancé. We’re only fake-engaged because the only way my younger sister, who’s real-engaged, can get married is if I get married first. He’s just my colleague who was nice enough to go along with this wild plan of mine.”

“Huh.” She quirks one brow as her gaze flits between me and Hunter and back again.

It’s a good thing we’re the only customers in line because this conversation is taking a while.

“That was way more information than I needed to know, but okay. I think you guys still make a cute couple, real or not. You should lock him down before someone else tries to. Believe me, good guys are hard to find.”

“Oh, I know. I once went on a date with a guy who did a whole PowerPoint presentation during dinner.”

“Nooo.” Her mouth twists in horror. “That should be illegal!”

“Right? ”

“I am so sorry that happened to you! You know what, your drink’s going to be on the

house. It's the least I can do."

"Oh, that's sweet of you, but you don't have to do that."

"Yeah," Hunter adds, "you don't have to do that. What happened to our agreement to not deny her man—that's me in case you forgot—the opportunity to buy her a drink?"

The barista narrows her eyes disapprovingly at him. "Sorry, but it ended when I found out you're not really her man."

"But—"

She turns to me and says, "So, what'll it be?"

"I'll take a large Oolong milk tea with 25% sugar, no ice, and boba, please."

"Got it. And you, sir?"

Buzz!

I pull my phone out, and my mom's disconcerting face pops up on the screen, urging me to take her call.

If I let it go to voicemail, I might as well say bon voyage because she'll be sending me on a guilt trip, no return ticket provided.

I quickly let Hunter know I'm stepping away, then find a table to sit down at. "Hey, Ma," I answer, "how's it going?"

"Fine, just fine." Her voice is more chipper than usual, which means she's probably

doing her favorite activity—playing mahjong. As expected, the clinking of plastic tiles sounds in the background. “How is my future son-in-law doing?”

“Bruce? I think he’s okay. Mei didn’t say anything when I talked to her yesterday. Why do you ask?”

“Not Bruce. I’m talking about Hunter.”

“Oh, that son-in-law.”

“Did you forget about him?”

I laugh nervously. Honestly? I kind of did.

Normal people usually have some time to get used to having a boyfriend before having a fiancé.

I apparently skipped the kiddie pool and dove straight into the deep end in more ways than one.

“Of course, I didn’t forget about my fiancé. I’m just not used to being engaged.”

“Well, you better get used to it because you’re going to be married soon.”

“Speaking of getting married, Ma,” I casually try to redirect the conversation to the actual engaged couple, “Mei was telling me about the venue she and Bruce have been looking at for their wedding. It’s a mansion in Morgan Hill and it’s usually booked a year in advance, but they happen to have a cancellation in January.

If she puts the deposit down today, she’ll be able to reserve it. Wouldn’t that be great?”

A moment of silence comes over the line, a sure sign that she's contemplating her next mahjong move.

My secret hope is that she'll be distracted just enough to not question what I'm saying.

But being the great multitasker that she is, she doesn't miss a thing.

"That means you and Hunter will get married before the end of the year. Have you started looking at venues yet?"

"We just got engaged, Ma. There's no rush. And anyways, we don't need a place that fancy that would require us to reserve it months in advance. We could get married at the courthouse for all we care."

"The courthouse? You want to get married in such a cold and ugly place?"

"The San Francisco courthouse is beautiful. People take their wedding photos there all the time. I'm just saying it's an option. But back to Mei—the important thing is that she gets her dream wedding. She's waited so long, Ma, she deserves it."

"You must know I have waited even longer for you to get married. And I'm not getting any younger. Many of my friends have grandbabies already. All I have are my mahjong trophies— zi mo !"

A chorus of groans comes over the line as my mother's friends witness her victory.

She just ended the game by drawing the winning tile herself, which means she'll be in an even better mood.

There's no better time to persuade her than now.

In my sweetest voice and using Mandarin—which I admit will soon turn into Chinglish—I say, “I know how much you want to be a grandma, and God willing, you will be. You know how much Mei wants kids. The sooner she gets married, the sooner your dream can come true. So, the best plan for everyone is for Mei to reserve her wedding venue today, don’t you agree? ”

“Fine.”

My jaw drops. “Fine? So, you’re okay with Mei putting the deposit down today?”

She sighs dramatically. “Yes. As you know, Lily, I’m not the one preventing her from getting married. I am following the tradition of our ancestors. But now that you are engaged, your sister can move forward with her plans.”

Hunter walks over with two drinks in hand and sits down at the table. His brow shoots up as he mouths, Everything okay?

I give him a thumbs-up and nod enthusiastically. “I’ll tell Mei the good news! She’ll be so thrilled. Thank you, Ma!”

“After you talk to her, you can make your reservation at City Hall. I’m looking at their website right now, and you can book the appointments for your wedding license and civil ceremony at the same time.”

My stomach sinks. I just set my own trap and walked right into it. “B-but what about the huge banquet that you want to invite all our relatives and your friends to?”

“We will plan that for later, of course. What’s important is that the two of you get married first.” She gasps. “I see an opening on the calendar for next week! Quick, give me Hunter’s birthday and his parents’ names. We need to take this spot before someone else claims it!”

“What?!” A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead. “Next week is a bit soon, don’t you think?”

“Is Hunter there with you?”

“He is.”

“Put him on the phone. Let me talk to him.”

I eye Hunter warily from across the table. He looks so calm and peaceful drinking his boba tea, with not a care in the world. I cannot, in good conscience, hand him over to my mother. “He’s kind of busy right now.”

“I’ll call him myself.”

As soon as my phone screen goes black, Hunter’s lights up. I don’t know when my mother even got his number, but that’s a moot point. He needs saving, and he needs saving fast. “Don’t?—”

“Hello?” His Superman reflexes are at work because he’s already chatting away with my mother—in perfect Mandarin, I might add. “My birthday? Sure, it’s...”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I drop my head into my hands.

I can’t believe the twists and turns this day has brought.

Just when I thought things were going in the right direction, my best intentions took us on a path straight into my mother’s trap.

Only two things are for sure: she’s in the best mood ever now, and it looks like Hunter and I are getting married.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

"Marriage: When dating goes too far." ~Unknown

“Are you sure about this, cuz?” My cousin, Ryder, tugs at his shirt collar and asks me this same question for the hundredth time on this Thursday morning.

“If you want to back out, there’s plenty of time to do so.

I’ll pull the car around and we can get out of this joint A-sap, no questions asked. How about it?”

I sigh and motion for him to follow me through City Hall.

Our dress shoes make a clicking sound on the tiles as we head to the rotunda.

Mine sounds like the rhythmic beat of a drum, while his is a tired shuffle.

If he hadn’t insisted on coming, I would’ve found someone else to be our witness.

I throw him a concerned look. “For the last time, Ry, I’m sure.

I’m ready to get hitched. You, on the other hand, are so nervous, you’d think you’re the one getting married today. ”

“You do realize this is for life?”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Of course. I sure hope it is. ”

He runs a hand through his dark, wavy hair, leaving the ends of it sticking up. His expression changes from concerned to one of admiration. “You’re a bigger man than I ever was. I hope things work out for you and Lily. If not, I’m going to get an earful from Amelia, so please don’t screw this up.”

My brow quirks at the mention of his ex-fiancée. “Since when did you start talking to Amelia again?”

“It’s a long story. We’re not back together, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I wasn’t, but okay. You’ll have to catch me up sometime. Or we could do a double date; I bet Lily would like that.”

“We’ll see.”

There’s more I want to ask Ryder, but the moment we step into the rotunda, my heart starts to pound.

The space is impressive, with pink marble and columns that look like they belong in Rome rather than San Francisco.

The sunshine coming in through the windows on the second and third floors cast a pink glow onto the floor, highlighting the designs carved into them that match the ones in the dome above us.

But what fully captures my attention is the gorgeous figure at the top of the staircase.

My steps slow down as my gaze locks onto her.

It's Lily. My colleague turned fake fiancée turned wife.

"Whoa," Ryder murmurs at my side, expressing my thoughts out loud. "Oh, wow."

I swallow hard, feeling the same awe and wonder to be in her presence. "I know, right? I can't get over it either."

"It looks daunting, but you'll be okay. It's not the first time you've faced something like that."

I turn to him, confused. "Huh?"

"There's only about 40 or 45. You can make it. You're in better shape than I am."

"What are you talking about?"

"The stairs, of course. Come on, I'll race you to the top!"

Before I can blink, Ryder takes off. I run after him, shaking my head, as a couple of middle-aged tourists take photos of us. We must be a sight to see, but we, along with everything around us, pale in comparison to the woman waiting for me on the second level.

I wince, however, when our eyes meet. Lily's complexion is almost as white as her dress. She couldn't be more beautiful in her long gown with its lacy sleeves and a low neckline that is modest yet intriguing, but her expression mirrors what Ryder's was a few minutes ago. "Hey, Lil, are you okay?"

"Hi! Yeah, I'm fine!" Her words come out in breathy spurts. A tense smile curves her lips, which are a bright shade of red and the only color in her face. "Thanks for coming. I wasn't sure if you'd show up or not. Well, the truth is I wasn't sure if I'd

show up or not.”

“Oh?”

“It’s silly, but I couldn’t find the right pair of shoes to match my dress. I thought it might rain, so I didn’t know if I should wear strappy sandals or pumps. Anyways, I ended up going with the pumps.”

I glance down at her high heels. “At least it wasn’t a case of cold feet.”

She bursts out laughing and her entire body relaxes. “Now you’re the one breaking out with the puns? I hope that doesn’t mean you’re stressed.”

“Not at all. Ryder, on the other hand—where’d he go?” I look around for my cousin and spot him talking to an older man whom I guess is the officiant. “He’s acting like this is my last day of freedom on earth.”

“It totally isn’t! Like I said before, you have no obligations to stick around after my sister and Bruce get married. None at all. This marriage of convenience is only until January. And before then, you and I will continue to be colleagues and friends.”

“And roommates, right?” Lily and I had gone over the details of this plan a few days ago when we came to get our marriage license, but I want to be sure nothing’s changed. “My guest room is all ready for you to stay in.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” she says, wrinkling her nose.

“I feel bad for cramping your style. You have your bachelor pad set up the way you want it. You don’t need me bringing over my makeup and clothes and jewelry, not to mention my shoes, and invading your space with all my girly stuff.

It's probably better if we stay at our own places. ”

I feign a pout. “I’m offended that you think I can’t handle girly stuff. I have two older sisters, remember? I grew up surrounded by every pink thing imaginable. Care Bears, My Little Pony, Polly Pocket—I was exposed to it all.”

“But that’s because you didn’t have a say back then.”

“You’re right, but I do now. And I mean it when I say you and all your girly stuff are welcome at my house.

You don’t have to be ke qi with me, Lil,” I say, reminding her not to be so polite.

“We’re equal partners in this. Just think of us like a dual-core processor.

Together, we can run applications faster, smoother, and more efficiently.

And with God as our power source, nothing can slow us down. ”

Her eyes soften as she gazes up at me. “I love it when you talk nerdy like that. Whoever gets to marry you is going to be so blessed. I mean, marry you for real since this one doesn’t count.”

Doesn’t count? I want to tell her that this wedding can be real and that we don’t have to put a time limit on our marriage, but her tone is so matter of fact, I can’t tell if she’s just being courteous.

“Thanks again for doing this for me, Hunter,” she continues. “ I know you’re sacrificing a lot. I don’t even know how I can ever repay you.”

“You could always name your firstborn after me.”

She raises a brow and says, “I would promise you that, but what if it’s a girl?”

“That’s easy. You can add a suffix and make it Hunterita or Hunterina. Better yet, Hunterella. That has a nice ring to it, don’t you think? I guarantee you she’d be the only girl in her class with that name.”

“More like the only girl in the world.” She laughs, looking a lot more relaxed now. “I’ll think about it.”

I see Ryder waving for us to head over. “Are you ready? I think it’s go time.”

Lily blows out a long breath and nods. “Let’s do this.”

“Hello, there!” The officiant calls us over to join him under the chandelier. He wears a black judge’s robe and holds a clipboard full of paperwork. “Are you the party of Payne and Lam?”

“That’s us!” Lily answers. “I’m Lily.”

“Hi, I’m Hunter.”

We all shake hands while Ryder positions himself a few feet away with his phone up, ready to take pictures.

“I’m Fred, and I’ll be handling your ceremony today. We have a full schedule today, so let’s have the two of you go ahead and face each other,” he instructs us. “Are you ready to start?”

Lily and I exchange nods.

“Feel free to stand closer and hold hands,” Fred says. He eyes the two of us curiously.

“I’ve never seen a stiffer couple in my fourteen years of working here. You guys are in love, aren’t you? Or is this some kind of arranged marriage?”

“Not arranged,” Lily whispers. “It’s a marriage of convenience.”

Fred narrows his eyes and frowns. “A marriage of what?”

“Convenience. Hunter’s helping me out by marrying me, so my sister can marry the guy she’s in love with.”

Fred cocks his head at me and asks, “You’re okay with this? Because it sounds kind of inconvenient to me.”

“I’m totally on board, one hundred percent.”

“Huh,” he says again. “What’s that phrase young people use these days? You be you?”

“Do,” Ryder pipes up. “It’s you do you.”

“Right. You do you. Back in my day it was whatever floats your boat. Let’s hope your ship has all the romance of the Titanic without the death and despair.” He throws in a wink as he laughs at his own joke. “Get it? Boat, ship, Titanic?”

“We get it.”

“Yep, got it.”

Lily and I share an amused grin. We don’t have to exchange words for me to know how absurd she thinks this situation is; the look in her eyes says it all.

But there's also a sense of relief in her smile, like she's grateful we're in this together.

I couldn't agree more. In a show of solidarity, I step forward and extend both of my hands to her.

She glances at them, then up at me, before she meets me halfway.

The moment our fingers touch, I'm locked in.

Everyone else fades away and the only person I see is Lily.

Somehow, I make it through the next few minutes and say my vows.

Lily says hers, too, and we exchange rings.

They're plain gold bands that her parents gave us, nothing fancy or personalized, but they symbolize a change in our relationship status better than any social media post. The ceremony then ends with Fred declaring us husband and wife.

The whole moment seems surreal, like I'm in a dream state.

But the instant I hear, "you may kiss the bride ", a shot of adrenaline rushes through my body, all the way up to my face.

I'm pretty sure I could give Rudolph a run for his money because my ears feel blazing hot.

Oh no. Someone's probably going to pull the fire alarm before I can kiss my wife.

I decide it's now or never.

Like the dramatic scene of a movie, music suddenly plays in the distance in the form of a cell phone ring tone.

It's the opening theme song to Star Wars.

While it's not the romantic piece I would've picked for this moment, it does remind me of Yoda's wise words: "Do or not do, there is no try." My heart pounds as I anticipate my next move—a move that I hope will rock Lily's world.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I dip her back slowly and carefully.

Then with all the love stored up in my heart, I capture her mouth with mine.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“New love is like a software update—it might have some bugs, but it also comes with cool new features.” ~Unknown

I think I’m glitching.

If I were a computer, I’d be malfunctioning right about now.

We’re talking about a flickering screen, weird crackling sounds, and multiple programs crashing at the same time.

You’d possibly even get the blue screen of death, but in my case, it would be a soft pink with glitter.

My hardware’s being inundated with too much external input—the bright light of the chandelier above, Hunter’s muscular arm cradling my waist, and his soft lips pressed to mine.

There’s also the rowdy sound of applause and cheers going up all around us, making me acutely aware that this moment is very, very public.

My heart is telling me to enjoy this moment—I’ve never been dipped and kissed before!

—but my brain (or what’s left of it) is warning me of a major system failure.

The strength in my legs is gone, and my limbs feel like wet noodles.

My insides are at the point of overheating, and there's no switch to turn off the fire.

Not when Hunter's so close. And certainly not with him kissing me like he never wants to stop.

But stop, he does.

Our connection is over before I can even respond.

He lifts me back onto my feet and steadies me for a second before letting go.

His ears are bright red like the traces of rouge on his mouth.

My hand goes to my lips, lips that are still warm from his touch.

I swallow hard as my body reboots itself and recovers from what feels like a virus.

My skin is hot, my thoughts are jumbled, and I'm weak all over. What does this all mean?

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Fred claps Hunter on the shoulder, then gives me a cheery thumbs-up. "You kids have a great marriage of inconvenience!"

"It's marriage of convenience," Hunter tries to tell him, but the older man has already moved onto his next victims.

Oops. Did I say victims? I mean couple.

There was no crime or accident involved in our union, but I do feel like I'm suffering

from some physical and emotional repercussions. I don't think any woman can be kissed by Hunter and not be affected. But did our kiss affect him?

He offers me a sheepish smile as he rubs the back of his neck. "I, uh, I'm sorry about that. I got carried away. I promise it won't happen again."

Won't happen again? "But?—"

"Lily? Is that you?"

I turn around and come face to face with a tall and slender redheaded woman dressed in a dark green power suit. With her hair pulled back in a low bun and a face full of makeup, she looks so different from her online persona. "Hadley? I almost didn't recognize you. What are you doing here?"

"I could say the same! Are you—you're not—you are!" She sucks in a sharp breath as she holds up my left hand. "Did you just get married?! I thought this was supposed to be a fake engagement. What on earth is going on?"

"Um, about that, I can explain."

"You better. But first, come here!" She wraps me up in a warm embrace that settles the nerves in my stomach.

Hadley is one of my book club buddies who lives in the area, and unlike me, she's a pro at physical affection.

She releases me from her hug and steps back with a grin.

"I can't believe I crashed your ceremony!"

And here I thought I was just coming to scope out this place for one of my clients. ”

“You have great timing.”

“The best, right? Well, it would’ve been better if I’d arrived five minutes earlier, but better late than never. Now, about this union of yours...”

I gesture to Hunter who’s been patiently watching us catch up. “I should probably introduce you to my... uh...”

“Hunter,” he finishes for me. He extends a hand to Hadley. “I guess you could call me Lily’s husband.”

“No handshakes allowed; this is a hugging occasion!” Hadley exclaims. “Any husband of Lily’s is a—oh, wait, that’s not going to work, is it? Well, you know what I mean! Come on over here!”

The two of them share a quick hug that leaves me smiling.

This scenario almost feels normal, except for the fact that I didn’t tell any of my girlfriends I was getting hitched today.

I hadn’t wanted to make it a big deal—there’s a limited number of guests allowed at the courthouse, which is how I’d convinced my family not to attend—but the real reason is that I didn’t want anyone warning me against this crazy, foolish idea.

That’s a fact I already knew. But it’s so gracious of God to allow Hadley to show up when she did so I’d have a friend here to give me support.

Because, boy, do I need some support.

“I’m so glad I ran into you guys,” Hadley says, “but I really have to go! I have clients waiting! I expect a full report during our next meeting, Lily!” She waves and blows kisses at us before turning to go.

So much for my source of support.

At least Hunter has his cousin who is now talking to Fred and signing what looks like a marriage certificate.

Our marriage certificate. I place a hand over my chest and try to take deep breaths.

All the warm fuzzies I had a few minutes ago during that kiss have fizzled away.

I stare at the ring on my hand as its significance hits me like an iceberg and I’m the Titanic.

What have I done?!

All my life, I’d looked forward to the day when I’d get to marry the love of my life.

And here I am, married to a man who is amazing and checks off all the boxes, but our relationship is only based on an agreement.

An agreement that can only last three months.

And one that will no longer include head-spinning kisses like the one Hunter just gave me.

What an inconvenient marriage, indeed.

“You know what?” I turn to Hunter and say the first thing that pops into my head. “I

feel like a brownie.”

“A brownie? Sure, let’s go get some brownies.”

“But it’s almost lunchtime. We’ll ruin our appetite. We can’t eat dessert before a meal.”

“Says who?”

“All the responsible adults in the world.”

“And are any of those people enjoying themselves?”

“Maybe not, but that’s life. We have responsibilities to fulfill. I already feel bad about playing hooky from work today.”

“You haven’t taken a day off all year, Lil.”

“Exactly. I broke my record. ”

“You know the company doesn’t give out perfect attendance awards, right?”

“But if they did, I’d be the first to get one.”

“I won’t argue with you there. How about I give you a brownie instead? Hold on a second though.” He strides over to Ryder and Fred, exchanges a few words with them, then returns to my side. “Okay, we can go now. Let’s get those brownies!”

“What about Ryder?”

“He’s a big boy, he can find his own ride home. If not, he should really think about

changing his name.”

I smile despite my mood and follow Hunter down the grand staircase.

If the circumstances were normal, these steps would be a great place to take wedding photos that we could frame and hang up in our home and show to our kids one day, but since we are not your typical couple, we keep on moving.

Past a handful of tourists taking pictures of the architecture and another couple on their way to get married who look as madly in love with each other as you’d expect them to be.

In a matter of minutes, we arrive outside to where Hunter’s sedan is parked on the street.

I’d taken an Uber here—one-way city streets and I don’t get along—so it works out that I can ride home with him.

Although, I’m not sure what home is going to look like for the foreseeable future or what anything will look like.

But I do know, thank the Lord, that I’m safe with Hunter.

He opens the passenger side door for me and places one hand along the top of the doorframe, so I don’t bump my head.

The gesture is so sweet and thoughtful, my insides melt a little.

It’s moments like this that reassure me of what a good guy he is.

I mean, he literally just married me without expecting anything in return. Who does

that?!

Apparently, a non-Chinese guy who speaks Mandarin, rescues me from PowerPoint presentations, and hates pineapple on his pizza.

I suppose two out of three ain't bad.

“Is there a specific place you have in mind for the brownies?” he asks, once he's seated behind the wheel. He pulls onto the road and starts heading for the 101 South freeway. “Or are you okay with homemade ones?”

“Don't tell me you make your own brownies, too?”

“One of my sisters gave me a recipe I've been wanting to try. They're pumpkin brownies, perfect for fall. How's that sound?”

“Perfect,” I muse to myself. My mother's right.

There's a term in Mandarin, you xiu, that means excellent or superior.

She used that word to describe Hunter every time I spoke with her this week, saying how I found someone more you xiu than me—the key word being more , not as .

I can't argue with her though. The more I find out about Hunter, the more I see how much he's out of my league. “So perfect.”

He glances at me briefly. “What did you mean by too ? You said, ‘don't tell me you make your own brownies, too?’ That presumes there's something else I also do.”

“Oh, there is a lot more than one something else. You seem to be good at a lot of things.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

I wince, not realizing how jaded I must sound. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that this whole week, my mom’s been telling me that she has no idea how I managed to find a man who’s so you xiu .”

“Your mom said that?”

I glance out my window, watching the road signs blur as we pick up speed. “Yep. She’s apparently become your number one fan. She thinks marrying you is the best thing I’ve ever done in my life. ”

“Wow. That’s very kind of her to say, even if it is completely untrue. I’ll have to bring her some more dried seafood to thank her the next time we see her.”

“Please don’t,” I reply, half-jokingly. “I’ll never be able to catch up to you.”

“I’m not here to compete with you, Lil.”

“Even if you’re not, it doesn’t stop my mom from comparing me to you any chance she gets. She’ll probably end up disowning me and adopting you instead.”

“Um, is that even legal?”

“I’m sure she could find a way to make it so. Then once you’re part of the Lam Fam, you can attend all the functions and eat all the fruit she’ll cut for you. You’ll have more than enough fiber to keep your insides moving.”

He cracks a smile. “I’d be sure to sneak a plate of fruit for you, too, so you can also have fiber for your insides. But, full disclosure, there are plenty of things I’m not good at.”

“Like what?”

“Skydiving, bull riding, and doing the splits, to name a few.”

I cock my head, waiting for him to say more, but he stays silent. “Those don’t count. They’re not regular things that most everyone can do. What about something more common like drawing or painting?”

“I wouldn’t call myself a professional, but I have taken some classes before, and my artwork might have placed in some competitions.”

“Some? How many is some?”

“Two... squared,” he admits sheepishly. “But it’s more of a hobby. Something I do to unwind after a long day of writing code.”

“Right.” If only my hobbies were half as successful as Hunter’s. I stare at his profile, wondering how he can be so handsome, kind, smart, and creative. “So, there’s nothing you don’t do well.”

“That’s not true.” With his eyes on the road, he thinks for a moment. “I’m not very good at making friends.”

“What are you talking about? I see you chatting with people all the time. People in our department, people in other departments—everyone knows your name.”

“Yes, but the one person I’d been trying to befriend the past year only started to enjoy talking to me a week ago.”

I blink in surprise. “You’re not referring to me, are you?”

“I am.”

“I didn’t know you wanted to be my friend.”

“Why do you think I tried to talk to you every day?”

“I thought you were trying to distract me from my work, so you’d come out on top.”

He scoffs loudly. “I rest my case.”

“I had no idea. I clearly read you wrong.” The grimace on his face tugs at my heartstrings. “If it’s any consolation, you did a lot more than befriend me. We did just get married.”

“We did, didn’t we?”

“Which goes to show that you are good at making friends.”

“Or maybe you’re the one who’s good at it. If you hadn’t given me a chance, we wouldn’t be where we are today.”

“It’s only because you agreed to go along with this wild plan of mine,” I remark while holding up my left hand.

The wedding band that had looked so foreign on my finger now feels a little more comfortable.

It may not symbolize true love, but at least it’s a sign of our friendship.

“It’s too bad we didn’t become friends sooner. ”

“So we could’ve gotten married earlier?” he jokes.

“No, silly. So I could have appreciated your sense of humor sooner.”

“Well, the good news is that you’ll have plenty of chances to do that after you move in. Say, why don’t we go pick up your stuff now before we head to my place? Then you can unpack while I make brownies and lunch—which we are going to eat in that exact order.”

“Sure. That sounds like a good idea.”

Despite the smile on my face, the tightness in my chest makes it hard to breathe. Things are getting real now. Starting today, I’ll be staying at Hunter’s, likely eating with him every day, and doing life with him.

As. His. Wife.

What scares me the most is the fact that there will be endless opportunities for me to enjoy his company and fall in love with him even more... and that’s the last thing my heart should be doing.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

“Marriage is like a mystery novel. You never know what’s going to happen next, but you’re pretty sure it’ll involve food.” ~Unknown

Lily didn’t kiss me back.

That’s all I can think about as I unload her luggage that we just picked up from her place and bring them inside my house. As much as I’d like to dwell on the fact that the circumstances are pushing us closer to one another, the reality is that my wife and I aren’t on the same page.

Yet.

Those three letters give me reason to pause and hope.

I’m still committed to treating her like the queen that she is, but I decide I need to practice patience and restraint.

I dislike those two words as much as pineapple on pizza right now, but for Lily’s sake, I’ll embrace them.

I’m in this for the long haul, just like the vows I made to her earlier today.

To have and to hold, till death do us part.

Let’s just hope her close proximity doesn’t do me in first .

“This will be your room, Lil.”

She squeezes past me as I stand in the doorway to the guest room.

It takes everything in me to not pull her close and dip her again as I remember how it felt to have her in my arms. With her curves pressed to my body and my mouth on hers.

Her lips were as soft as I’d imagined they’d be, but they were also sadly, unexpectedly nonresponsive.

The memory gives me the reality check I need to pull me back to the present.

“This is nice, Hunter! The bedding even matches the curtains.” She runs a hand down the leaf print duvet cover. “I love the earthy tones you chose. You have a good eye for color.”

“I can’t take all the credit. My mom helped me pick them out.”

“She has good taste.” She glances outside the window that overlooks the backyard before turning back to me. “I didn’t get a chance to ask you, but what did your parents say when you told them about you getting married? Or did you not tell them?”

“I did tell them. There’s not much that I don’t tell my folks.” What I don’t mention to Lily is how much I told my parents about my feelings for her. “They were supportive, and they said they’d pray for us.”

“They’re okay with you helping me out in this unconventional way?”

I nod, leaning my back against the door frame. “They trust my judgment.”

“They sound so supportive. How about your sisters?”

“I haven’t told them yet. Not that I don’t tell them things, but they’re a little too helpful sometimes.

” I smirk and make air quotes around the word helpful .

“They like to set me up on blind dates with their friends’ younger sisters or cousins or random women they meet at the store or at church.

I’ve learned that the less they know about my love life, the better. ”

She grins. “They sound sweet though. What are you going to say if they try to set you up on another date?”

I’d like to think Lily’s asking this question because she doesn’t want me going out with anyone else, but I know it’s wishful thinking. Her tone is neither jealous nor concerned. “I haven’t thought about it yet. What do you think I should say?”

“Hmm. You could say you have a project to finish, and you won’t be free until January.”

“That’s not too far from the truth.” My stomach twists with disappointment. Those brownies sound like a good consolation prize. “Why don’t you unpack and get settled? I’ll let you know when dessert’s ready.”

I spend the next forty-five minutes baking and cooking until the smell of chocolate and Italian spices permeate every corner of the kitchen.

By the time I pull the brownies out of the oven and take the cast iron pan of seafood pasta off the stove, my shirt is untucked, and my sleeves are rolled up.

I've probably got flour on my face, too, but I'm in too much of a rush to care.

I plate the food, then bring everything, along with the utensils and drinks, to the dining table.

The spread looks so good, I give myself a little pat on the back.

Lily's my first—and most important—guest in this home, so I want to be sure everything is top-notch for her.

“Wow,” she suddenly pipes up behind me. “Don't tell me you made the pasta from scratch?”

I turn around to find Lily looking comfortable in black leggings and a sweatshirt.

Her smile tells me she's impressed with the meal I put together, which fills me with relief.

“Hey, you're just in time. Have a seat. And no, I didn't make the pasta from scratch this time since I was making brownies, too. I hope you don't mind.”

She laughs as she sits down. “I would never complain about someone cooking for me. Thank you for all of this. It looks and smells delicious.”

I take off my apron and hang it on the back of my chair before sitting across from her.

Extending my hand, I offer to say grace.

She takes a beat to respond, but when she does, her palm fits securely against mine.

For a moment, I pretend we're husband and wife in more than name only as I close

my eyes.

I pray for as long as possible, thanking God for everything about this day and, truth be told, so I can hold Lily's hand a little longer.

When I finally open my eyes, I'm surprised to see her studying me.

There's a glint in her deep brown eyes that makes me swallow hard.

"You look like you either have a brilliant plan or a scary one," I say as I push the plate of brownies toward her. "Which is it?"

"Brilliant, of course. Oh! This is brilliant, too!" She points to the brownie that she took a bite out of and practically cradles it against her chest. "The pumpkin flavor cuts the bitterness of the cocoa just enough."

"I'm glad you like it." A smile appears easily on my face. Watching Lily enjoy the brownie is like the perfect sugar high for me—all the sweetness without the inevitable crash. "We should make eating dessert first a habit in our marriage."

Her eyes widen. "That sounds pretty official. But I suppose we could since this is all temporary anyways."

Ouch, right. It looks like I will be crashing after all.

"Back to my brilliant plan," she continues. "I've decided to do something for you in return for everything you're doing for me. I'm going to help you find a girlfriend."

I almost spit out the brownie bits in my mouth. "You're going to do what?"

"Help you meet women, so you can meet the woman of your dreams."

I was right to be worried about that glint in her eyes. “I don’t need help meeting women, Lil. I don’t say that to brag or anything, but that’s not a concern of mine.”

“That’s true.” Her expression turns thoughtful. “So, you don’t need help meeting women, but maybe you could use some practice talking to them?”

“That’s not really an issue either.” I spear a shrimp with my fork and start digging into my pasta. “I have two sisters I talk to on a regular basis.”

“That’s different. I’m talking about practicing what you would do if you were on a date with a woman who’s not your family. And what better person to practice with than me—a woman?”

I pause mid-chew and digest Lily’s words.

The idea she’s throwing out is better than anything I could have come up with.

What better way to romance my wife than to date her?

God, You’re a genius! Not that the Lord didn’t know that already, but I’m continually blown away by how He works everything together for good for His children.

Keeping my tone nonchalant, I ask Lily, “What you’re suggesting is that we role play going on dates together?”

She nods. “Practice makes perfect, right? What do you say?”

“I say let’s start tonight. I’ll pick you up at six.”

Now it’s time to plan the most romantic date ever.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“Our love is like Wi-Fi. Sometimes there are connection issues, but mostly it’s just magic.” ~Unknown

I don’t know why I’m so nervous. It’s less than an hour before Hunter’s and my date, and I’ve had to reapply my antiperspirant twice since I got dressed.

Maybe it’s the fact that I’m wearing a sweater dress—with a cute cowl neck, I might add—or that I care about how this evening’s going to go. Hmm. It’s got to be the former, right?

I can almost picture God rolling His eyes.

He’s the only one I’m willing to admit my foolishness to because He already knows everything anyway.

I got myself into this mess, and I may have made it worse by suggesting to Hunter that we practice dating.

The truth is, I do want to help him find a real wife, but I also don’t mind being his inconvenient one for the time being.

And boy, is this a marriage of inconvenience because I am oh-so-inconveniently falling for a man who is not really mine.

There’s not much I can do at this point but to change into something more

comfortable.

I choose a rust-and-black leopard print dress.

The asymmetrical ruffle hem that falls above my knees, along with the three-quarter sleeves, leave me feeling a lot cooler.

After slipping on a chunky gold bracelet, I strike a pose in front of the full-length standing mirror in the corner of the bedroom.

The lighting in this space is phenomenal, especially the large, flat circular light mounted on the ceiling.

Its white LED glow is perfect for filming videos and taking photos.

I have no idea why Hunter has such a nice setup in his guest room, but I'm going to take advantage of it and film a Get Ready with Me video.

It's been a week since I last posted any new content on social media, and my followers have been asking for more.

Taking a seat at the small vanity desk by the window, I set up my phone on a mini tripod, attach a ring light to it, and pull out my makeup bag.

In a matter of minutes, I'm ready to hit the "live" recording button.

"Hey there, lovelies! It's your neighborhood curvy girl, Lily Lam, here to say hello while I do my makeup.

How have you been? I know it's been a minute since I last came on here.

There's a lot going on in my life right now, and I've missed talking with you guys.

Feel free to drop a comment and let me know how you're doing.

Are you enjoying any pumpkin spice foods yet?

What products are you loving right now? Do you have any prayer requests or praises to share? Let me know!"

The comments start rolling in while I work on my soft dewy makeup look.

I've missed you, Lily! Do you have a favorite crossbody bag that's comfy for someone plus size and tall?

Hey, Lily! What foundation are you using? I can never get that healthy glow like you. I end up looking like I've been trapped in a greenhouse .

Can you pray for my job interview tomorrow, Lily? I love that you pray for us!

My heart fills with joy as I interact with these ladies.

Most of them have been with me since my early days when I didn't know the difference between a sculpting brush and a tapered brush (the former's for contouring and definition while the latter's for highlighting and blending).

I recognize most of the usernames and know a bit about each of them from what they've shared.

Having a little community where I can talk about girly things after being surrounded by testosterone all day at work is so much fun.

I've even met a couple of other female engineers who also enjoy makeup and clothes as much as I do.

One of my regular viewers, @GeekyGirlsRule, pops up in my comments: Speaking of pumpkin spice, do you have any recipes you recommend?

“Hey, @GeekyGirlsRule, it's good to see you! I actually had this amazing pumpkin brownie that my, uh, friend made for me today. I'll ask him for the recipe and post it in the comments later tonight.”

Him?! What kind of friend is this, Lily? You've never mentioned a guy before.

You're seeing someone? And he made you brownies? He sounds like a keeper!

When do we get to meet your boyfriend??

I put my stippling brush down, certain that I won't be needing more blush at the rate these questions are popping up on the screen.

Shaking my head, I attempt to put these ladies' suspicions to rest. “Guys, calm down! He's not my boyfriend,” I say, knowing full well that the real answer—he's actually my husband!

—would have them begging for more tea. “He's a friend and a colleague.

And really good at baking and cooking and pretty much anything you can think of. ”

He's cooked for you, too? Are you sure he doesn't want to be more than friends?

That's what my hubby did when he pursued me!

He totally likes you, Lily! Denial is not only a river in Egypt!

“You guys! I can promise you he’s not into me.

He’s just a good friend.” A flow of emojis, ranging from the skeptical face to the one with a raised eyebrow, clutter my view.

It’s getting harder for me to keep my expression neutral when I wonder if there’s any truth to their comments.

There’s no better time to end this video than now.

I finish applying some lip gloss before using a setting spray all over my face.

With a bright smile, I say to the camera, “Thanks for joining me today, lovelies! I’ll list the products I used in the comments later, along with that brownie recipe. Have a great even?—”

Knock knock!

“Hey, Lil, are you ready to go?” Hunter’s voice calls out through the closed door. “It’s five till seven.”

I freeze in place as dozens of comments start flying across the phone screen.

Who’s that? It sounds like a guy!

Did you get a roommate, Lily?

Do you have a hot date?!

Great. It's just my luck that Hunter's deep voice has the ability to travel thousands of miles like a whale call to reach the ears of my viewers. How am I supposed to explain his presence? I don't want to lie. But I don't want to tell the truth either. So, I do the easiest thing—procrastinate.

“I have to go, but I'll explain everything later! Bye!”

The screen goes dark as I end the video. My heart's pounding, but it's not only because of all the questions I just dodged. I have no idea what to expect on this date. And yes, I'll admit it, I care what Hunter thinks of me. A lot .

Sigh. I'm in so deep, I might as well travel by submarine from now on.

“Lil?” He knocks softly on the door. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, hold on a sec! I'm coming!”

Taking one last look at myself in the mirror, I shake my arms to get the nerves out. This is Hunter, I reassure myself. My nerdy, kind, and supportive friend who is now my hot husband.

I groan and throw my hands in the air. It's too late. I might as well wave a white flag because I have no idea how I'm going to get through this evening... or the next three months.

Throwing caution to the wind and all my sense into the depths of the sea, I run to the door.

As soon as I open it and see Hunter standing on the other side, my anxiety melts away.

What is it with this man? One smile from him, and I'm like a flower in bloom.

A giddy feeling rises in my chest, making me grin like a fool.

I have to use all my self-control to not swoon and bat my lashes like some lovesick teenager in the presence of her crush.

Ugh. Maybe it's all those romance books I've been reading.

They've turned me soft! I'm seriously going to suggest we read a dystopian story at our next book club meeting.

"You look amazing, Lil. This is for you."

My jaw drops as Hunter presents me with a plate of cookies that he'd hidden behind his back. The scents of sugar and butter fill my nose as I inhale deeply. I bite into an oatmeal raisin one, delighted to find out it's still warm.

"Did you just bake these? Hunter, you've outdone yourself!"

There are like four different kinds of cookies here. "

"The base is more or less the same for all of them. I just added in different mix-ins. Do you like it?"

I sigh happily. "Yes! You weren't kidding about us eating dessert first. I'm going to be so spoiled by you."

He grins and presents his arm for me to take. "That's kind of the idea. Come on, let's get this date started."

“Where are we going?”

“To the backyard. I hope you don’t mind doing something different.”

“Different is cool. I’ve had my share of dinner dates at Chinese restaurants for a while.”

“I promise you there will be no slideshows or inquisitions involved tonight.”

“I like the sound of that. Lead the way!”

He takes me down the hall and through the rest of the single-story house until we reach the back door.

Opening it, he gestures for me to go first. It’s already dark outside, but there are bright lights strung up along the roof and wrapped around the trunk of a small tree.

Flames dance in the fire pit at the center of the space, creating an inviting glow.

But the highlight of the yard is the comfiest-looking swing chair.

It’s shaped like an egg with large blue cushions that I can’t wait to sink my body into.

I kick off my heels and run across the grass, then plop myself down. The swing rocks back and forth as I lean back and gaze up at the starry sky. “I’ve always wanted one of these! It’s the perfect place to read—whoa!”

“What’s wrong?” Hunter’s about to sit down beside me, but he stops when I stand up. With a goofy grin, he says, “I promise I don’t have cooties. I got those taken care of in middle school.”

“It’s not that; I can handle some cooties. But we can’t both fit on this swing at the same time. I’m sure there’s a weight limit.”

“We’ll be fine.” He pats the spot beside him. “Have a seat.”

I place my hands on my hips and shake my head. “You’re probably used to dainty, petite women sitting with you, but I have curves, if you haven’t noticed.”

“I’ve noticed.” His voice is so low, it practically hums. “Trust me, Lil, I’ve noticed. Please sit down.”

To my surprise, I stop fighting and do as I’m told.

There’s no denying that I’ve fallen hopelessly and completely under his spell.

I’ve got a case of Hunteritis, and I have it bad.

I love the confident way he talks and the assurance he gives me that I can trust him.

And I actually do. Slowly and carefully, I resume my place on the swing.

Only after I’ve put my full weight on it do I breathe again. “I guess you were right.”

“What was that?”

“I said you were—” I cut myself off when I notice the smirk playing on his lips. “Did you pretend to not hear me so I’d have to say it again?”

“Say what again?”

I roll my eyes. “Just because you look cute when you’re pretending to be innocent

doesn't mean I'm going to fall for that trick."

He sticks out his lower lip, a look that is so ridiculously adorable for a grown man his size. Sighing, he replies, "Fine. I know you're too smart to fall for my antics. But I did get you to admit that you think I'm cute."

Ugh, I did, didn't I? Choosing to avoid his gaze, I look up at the sky and try to sound nonchalant. "It's not exactly a secret. I was stating a well-known fact, like how the moon is round tonight."

"It's actually in the waning gibbous phase where it's transitioning from a full moon to a half-moon."

"Is that right? I do love it when you talk nerdy to me."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I chance a glance in his direction. I'd expected him to make a funny comeback, but his expression is all business.

He tucks a lock of my wind-blown hair behind my ear. "I think you're cute, too. And beautiful inside and out. I happen to love your sexy curves."

My heart flutters, then flops over and ceases to beat.

I'm gone. Hunteritis has claimed me as its willing victim.

Hearing Hunter say I'm beautiful and sexy in that beautiful and sexy voice of his is more than I can handle.

But when he leans in close and his gaze drops to my lips, a rush of adrenaline brings

me back to life.

If Hunter Payne is going to kiss me again, I'm ready to respond.

Hunter

“New relationships are like software updates... You agree to all the terms and conditions without actually reading them.” ~Unknown

I’m so relieved Lily’s enjoying our evening so far. The sweet smile on her lips says it all. I take it as a clear sign that I chose the right destination for our date. Now I’m ready to blow her mind with the next surprise I have planned.

“Close your eyes, Lil.”

She obeys without hesitation and even tilts her chin up, expectantly. In a breathy voice, she murmurs, “I’m ready.”

I quickly reach under the swing for the basket I stashed there earlier.

Inside is dinner (sandwiches from Lily’s favorite shop), drinks (boba teas, of course), and a couple of paperbacks I bought from her online wish list. I place Lily’s items on the side table next to her, then put mine on the table beside me.

Once I’m done setting up, I take the blanket that was at the bottom of the basket and drape it over her lap.

“Open your eyes!” I announce with a fake British accent since everything sounds fancier with an accent. “Dinner is served!”

She glances around and says a simple, “Oh.”

Just oh? I swallow down my disappointment like it's stale, day-old boba.

The look on Lily's face is the opposite from what it was a minute ago.

A frown has replaced her smile, but I can tell she's trying to lighten her expression.

I can't do anything to fix mine though. This was not the reaction I was hoping for.

"Not quite what you expected? No problem, we can go out to eat. There are plenty of restaurants around here to choose from."

"No, this is great! Thank you for preparing all of this, Hunter. I really appreciate your effort and thoughtfulness."

I shrug, trying not to make it a big deal.

This date is about Lily, not me. "I thought since we were already playing hooky from work, it'd be a good chance for you to spend the day, or what we have left of it, reading, not triple checking every email for typos before you send it, and letting your mom's calls go to voicemail. "

Her eyes grow wide as she realizes my plan. "You're helping me be irresponsible for a day?"

"I'd like to think of it as being human. You're allowed to not be perfect since you can't be perfect anyway."

A loud groan escapes her lips. "Ouch. Thanks for breaking it to me so ungently."

"Sorry." I smile, not feeling sorry in the least, but I do soften my tone.

“The truth hurts, but it can also set you free. So, be free, Lil. Take the night off from trying to be a perfect employee and daughter. Read a book or two, eat your sandwich, and drink your boba. Feel free to turn off your phone or at least put it on silent. The earth will keep on spinning if you don’t pick it up for a few hours.”

“You’re right.” Her smile is uncertain, but her posture is more relaxed. “I know the world won’t end if I slack off a little.”

“It’s called rest, Lil. Even Superman needs a break now and then.”

“Does he?”

The pointed look she adds to her question makes me feel like she’s calling me out.

Why she would put me on the same level as the man of steel doesn’t make any sense, so I don’t think much of it.

“Of course. Forget Superman, even God Almighty rested on the seventh day of creation. You’re allowed to rest and enjoy the blessings He’s given you.”

A wry smile curves her lips. “I guess I can’t argue with that. Thank you. This means a lot. You’re the best friend and marriage of inconvenience husband I could have asked for.”

“You mean marriage of convenience husband?”

“No, you heard me right. This is extremely ma fan for you,” she remarks, using the Mandarin term for troublesome, “so the word inconvenience suits the situation much better.”

“It’s not ma fan for me at all, Lil. You didn’t force me to marry you.

I agreed because I wanted to.” There’s no plainer way for me to say this, so I hope she accepts it.

But there is something I want to clear up...

“I thought inconvenience was in reference to one person catching feelings for the other person but not having them reciprocated?”

“Right. But that’s not the case for us, so there’s no worry there.” She takes her boba tea and pokes the straw into the plastic top without spilling a drop like the pro that she is. “This is so good. Thanks again, Hunter. I’m going to pick a book to read now, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course, go for it.”

An uncomfortable lull in the conversation ensues, more so on my part because Lily seems perfectly content.

She’s in her element with a paperback in one hand and her sandwich in the other.

Her boba tea sits off to the side along with the plate of cookies.

We are mere inches apart, but she might as well be a world away.

And to think that I’d assumed her use of the word inconvenience meant something.

Like the tiny, infinitesimal chance that she could feel something for me?

That’s about as likely as me waking up with perfect vision tomorrow.

Speaking of sleep, my body suddenly feels the adrenaline rush of the day wear off.

My eyelids flutter as I fight the urge to let them fall, but they ultimately win.

I can feel my limbs turning into wet noodles as I drift off into la-la land.

At least in my dreams, I can imagine what a real relationship with Lily could be like.

I have no idea how long I'm out, but when I wake up, the sky is fully dark. An owl hoots in the distance as the rest of the neighborhood remains quiet. I wonder if Lily fell asleep as well, but a soft slurp slurp to my left confirms that she's still working on her tea.

I stretch my arms, causing the swing to sway. "How's the story?"

"Hey!" she exclaims. "Did I wake you with my slurping? Sorry, those last few bobas are always so hard to suck up."

"No, you're good. I woke up on my own." I start in on my own tea and sandwich, suddenly feeling as ravenous as my name. "It looks like you're enjoying the book."

"It's so good! I can't believe I almost gave up on reading romance. It's the best genre there is."

"Why would you have done that?"

"Because romance books are completely unrealistic. But the upside is that they're at least more predictable than real life."

"That is especially true coming from a woman who went to dinner with Mr. PowerPoint, then married her coworker, all in the span of a week."

"Don't remind me." She smirks. "Apparently, I'm the poster girl for the saying, truth

is stranger than fiction. ”

“Be proud of it. You probably have the most interesting life of anyone you know right now. Far more interesting than the guys at work. Speaking of work, do you mind going into the office early tomorrow? I have an eight-thirty meeting.”

“Are you suggesting that we go together?”

“Unless you want to sleep in. I just figured we could save time if we carpool.”

“That does make sense. But let’s not go into the building at the same time, okay? You can go in first, then I’ll wait a few minutes before I go in.”

I chuckle at her mysterious tone. “If you’re trying to keep our marriage exciting, I suppose that’s one way to do it.”

She laughs and gives me an eyeroll. “It’s to keep our new relationship status under wraps. You know how fast gossip travels in the office. It’ll be less complicated this way, especially when we part ways in a few months.”

“You’re probably right,” I reluctantly agree, even though the dream I’d just woken up from had been about me sending out a company-wide email to announce our union.

I’d also been wearing a red cape and blue tights, which I’d never be able to pull off in real life, so I guess it works out that this scene was for my eyes only.

My eyes...

I suddenly realize how dry they feel. No matter how much I blink, I can’t get enough moisture in them.

Even a few rounds of ocular aerobics—looking up, down, and all around—don’t give me any relief.

I swallow hard as my worst fear manifests before my poor, parched eyes—my contact lenses are stuck to my eyeballs.

“Uh, Lil, I think we have a problem.”

“What is it?” She sets her book down to look at me. “Did they forget to add boba to your drink? I hate when that happens, and you don’t realize it until you get home.”

“No, it’s not the boba. It’s my eyes. They’re so dry, I’m pretty sure my contacts are dried up.”

“Oh, that’s no problem. I know exactly what to do.” She rises to her feet and calls over her shoulder as she enters the house, “Hang on, I’ll be right back.”

I breathe a little easier knowing that Lily has a solution.

Of course, she does; she’s my helpmate, after all, at least for the time being.

I have full confidence in her brilliant brain.

She has the best logic and reasoning skills out of anyone I know.

There’s no doubt she’ll get me out of this pickle once she returns...

Oh. My. Goodness.

The moment she steps back into the yard, a chill falls down my back. She has a bottle of contact solution in one hand and a clear container of Q-tips in the other.

Q-tips?!

Is Lily planning to get near my eyes with those pointy things?

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“We’re like a software update—no one asked for us, but once we’re together, we’re impossible to ignore.” ~Unknown

This day just keeps getting better and better... and I mean that in the most awkward way possible.

First, I marry my coworker whom I’m secretly falling in love with.

Next, I suggest to him that we practice dating because I apparently don’t think our forced proximity situation of living in the same house is enough torture.

Then, he prepares the sweetest evening for me to enjoy, complete with all my favorite things, that makes me like him even more.

And somewhere in all of that, I had the foolish idea that he was going to kiss me.

But the strangest, most surreal part wasn’t the civil ceremony or that Hunter chose the exact three books I’d been eyeing on my wish list. It’s the fact that we are now sitting nose to nose on the swing in the most intimately awkward way possible.

“You have really nice eyes,” I remark, trying to make conversation as I assess the situation with his contacts. “They look blue from a distance but more bluish green up close.”

“If you’re trying to distract me, it’s working,” he murmurs, barely moving his lips.

“Please, keep talking.”

I hold back a laugh, so I don’t make him more nervous than he already is.

It’s impressive how still he’s being, like a tall, immovable Redwood tree during a storm.

He’s doing everything he can to not get stabbed in the eye by me.

Not that a Q-tip could do that much damage... I hope. “What should I talk about?”

“Anything you want. Just not about people losing their eyes to Q-tips, anything but that.”

I do chuckle out loud this time, which earns me a grunt from Hunter. “Sorry, I’m not laughing at you.”

“Sure, you’re not.”

“I’m laughing at the situation.” I hold up the Q-tip that I just bent in the middle to form a makeshift pair of forceps. Using the contact solution, I wet one end before instructing Hunter to open his eyes wider. “I mean, did you ever think I’d be plucking your contact out with a Q-tip tonight?”

“Ow. Do you have to use the word pluck ? Plucking implies pain.”

“Not always. But fine, how about extracting? Is that better?”

He gasps. “That’s what dentists say about pulling teeth. It’s even worse than plucking.”

“Good point. I guess I got numb to dental jargon after hearing my parents talk about drilling and scalping at the dinner table.”

A line forms between his brows for a millisecond. “Okay, we are definitely establishing a ‘no dental jargon’ rule for our dinner conversations starting tomorrow. I prefer to eat my meals without flinching.”

“Speaking of flinching or not flinching, I’m going to touch the Q-tip to your contact lens now to try to loosen it. Don’t move, okay?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere. I’m not even going to breathe.”

I watch him take a breath, then puff out his cheeks to resemble a pufferfish.

It amazes me how this grown man is so adorable at times.

I love how he can let loose and be goofy like this without caring what other people think about him.

His expression is so endearing, I just want to poke the side of his face...

“Hey!” Hunter grins and grabs my finger right before it touches him. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I smile sheepishly. “I had this urge to poke you. I blame your cheek. It was calling out to me, saying ‘poke me, poke me.’”

“My cheek was talking to you? You expect me to believe that, Lil?”

“If you saw your face and how cute you looked with your round cheeks, you’d want to poke yourself, too.”

He bursts out laughing at this point. I fight hard not to join him, but it's a losing battle.

Soon, tears are rolling down my cheeks. A ball of tension unravels within my chest, releasing all the stress and worry I carried inside me the last few days.

My whole body shakes with laughter, from giggles to chuckles to full-on guffaws.

I can hardly catch my breath, and I can't stop laughing.

It's like a snack attack where you can't just eat one potato chip.

I laugh and laugh for probably a full minute until my sides hurt.

By the time I stop, I open my eyes to find Hunter just watching me.

Under any other circumstance, I'd be mortified to be the center of attention when I'm so out of my element, but the smile on his face puts me at ease.

There's also the fact that he's now not only holding my finger but my whole hand.

When did that happen?!

"I don't think I've ever seen you laugh so freely before," he remarks. "I didn't mean to stare; I couldn't help it. I blame your beauty," he adds with a sappy grin. "You're so beautiful when you laugh."

"Are you stealing my lines now?" I mean to sound lighthearted and funny, but my voice comes out soft and breathy. It's all because of Hunter. He's turned me into a sappy mess.

For the first time, I understand what romance authors mean when they write things like my knees grew weak or the whole world faded away and all I could see was him . My heart races while my vision zones in on the sweet and handsome man before me.

One side of his mouth curves up as he responds, “I think it’s only fair since you stole my heart.”

“I... what?” I’ve never stolen anything before, least of all a man’s heart! “I might need you to repeat that.”

“You stole my heart, Lil. Ever since the first day we met, I’ve kind of been in love with you.

It started out as a crush, but the more I got to know you—and yes, my bugging you every day was me trying to get to know you better—the more I liked you.

This idea of yours to have a marriage of inconvenience couldn’t have worked out better for me if I’d planned it myself.

And I mean inconvenience in the sense that I’ve fallen for you, and you likely don’t feel the same for me.

But I’m taking a chance and putting myself out there.

Something about seeing you laugh like that made me realize how much I’d be missing if I didn’t tell you how I feel. ”

His grip on my hand tightens as his voice grows husky.

“The truth is I couldn’t be happier to be your husband.

And I want nothing more than for you to be my wife today, tomorrow, and all the days the Lord has for us.

I know this is a lot to digest, and I don't expect an answer right now, but I hope you'll consider what I'm saying and let me know what you think when you're?—"

The last of Hunter's words gets muffled, caught between my mouth and his.

Yes, I waste no time in letting him know how I feel.

It's a soft kiss, more like a brush across his lips, but it's enough to make him speechless.

His eyes grow big, and his ears turn red, the reddest I've ever seen them.

He chuckles softly, his warm breath caressing my skin.

"I was going to say, 'Let me know what you think when you're ready.'"

"Hmm," is all I manage to squeak out.

Now I'm the one who's speechless. Everything Hunter said was exactly what I needed to hear.

It's more than I ever thought possible, and I want him to know that we are on the exact same page.

I'm so on board that if I were Rose and he was Jack, I'd make room for him on that floating piece of wood without hesitation.

My man would know that I'd never let him go.

He must get my unspoken message because he's the one kissing me now.

One of his arms wraps around my waist and presses me to his firm torso.

His other hand gently strokes my cheek, leaving warm tingles along my skin with every touch.

His lips are eager but polite as if he's dipping his toes into the pool to test the temperature before going in.

I'm done treading water, though; I'm ready to dive all in.

I deepen the kiss and invite Hunter into that bottomless end with me.

It's new, uncharted territory, but I have faith in his heart and in the strength of his character that he will keep me safe.

I lift my arms and encircle his neck so I can run my fingers through his thick hair.

He leans me back into the cushion and continues kissing my mouth, then along the side of my neck.

Every part of me feels his care and adoration as if I'm a porcelain vase from a long-ago dynasty that he holds in his hands.

It doesn't matter if I feel obtrusive or outdated or gaudy; to Hunter, I'm priceless.

I see this truth in his eyes when he stops to look at me.

"Is that all?" I ask breathlessly, feeling like a puddle of happy, melty goo. "I don't mind if you kiss me some more. And for the record, I like you, too, a lot, in case you

weren't sure."

He cracks a smile. "I think that kiss clued me in on how you feel. And I do want to kiss you more, but I need to get these contacts out first. I'm afraid they're not allowing me to kiss to my full potential."

My jaw drops. Hunter can kiss even better than that?! I guess I shouldn't be surprised at this point, but this new knowledge makes me eager to help him out. "We better do something about that! Hand me those Q-tips! No more puffy cheeks though or else I'll never stop laughing!"

"Deal!"

This time while Hunter stays still and less blowfish-like, I'm able to remove—without plucking or extracting!—his contact lenses in record time.

He blinks his eyes and nods, looking satisfied and relieved. "Thank you, Lil. You saved the day."

I toss the used Q-tips and his daily-wear lenses into a bag set aside for trash. "It's not that big of a deal. Anyone could have done it."

"I wouldn't have trusted just anyone to do what you did." His gaze softens as he brushes a lock of windblown hair off my cheek. "It was a big deal to me and my eyeballs. Such a big deal that I plan on relaying my thanks to you in the form of a very, very, very long kiss, if you'll accept it."

"Do you have to ask twice? "

I lean forward and pucker my lips, ready to soak up his gratitude.

Suddenly, my phone sounds from the side table where I'd put it earlier.

I regret not turning it off, but it's too late now.

The opening line of The Beatles' song, "Help!" cuts through the quiet of the night.

It's my mother's ringtone, so aptly chosen for moments like this when I wish someone would come to my rescue. "Sorry, I should get that."

"It's your mom, isn't it?" Hunter offers me a sympathetic smile. "It's okay to let it go to voicemail, Lil."

"Is it, though?"

"It's up to you. No pressure. We can always kiss later."

I shake my head. Talk to my mother or kiss Hunter? What am I even hesitating for?

I let the call go to voicemail, then dive back into my husband's embrace and hope I don't regret my decision later.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

“We go together like copy and paste, a perfect match but with occasional formatting issues.” ~Unknown

If I wasn't behind the wheel driving to work, I'd be pinching myself right now.

Instead, I'm holding the hand of the woman I love while we sing “We are the Champions” at the top of our lungs.

It turns out that not only is my wife a Q-tip-wielding superhero, she also has the voice of an angel.

She can harmonize a third above and below the melody line without breaking a sweat.

It's only our second day of marriage, and I'm falling even more in love with Lily.

I glance over at her while we wait for the signal light to change.

She's dressed more casually since it's a Friday, but she still looks amazing in jeans, a white shirt, and a leopard-print jacket.

Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, revealing the curve of her neck that I'm now familiar with after last night.

Our kissing session may have ended with each one of us sleeping in our own

bedrooms, but I'm confident we'll continue to grow closer and more comfortable together the longer we're married.

Because the enthusiastic way Lily kissed me last night tells me I'm not the only hunter in this relationship.

But I certainly don't mind being her prey.

Oh man, it's a good thing these puns are only in my head. I don't think Lily could handle that much cheese.

"What are you smiling about?" she asks me when she notices me staring at her.

"I'm just thinking about how perfect you are."

She rolls her eyes. "I already like you, Hunter. You don't have to *pai ma pi* with me," she says, referring to the Mandarin idiom that literally translates to pat a horse's bottom.

"I'm not kissing up to you, Lil. I mean it. You're the perfect wife I prayed for."

"You don't know when to stop, do you?" She nudges me with her elbow. "It's our turn to go."

"Oh, thanks." I step on the gas and continue driving along the local streets of Mountain View.

"See? Even the way you told me the light changed is perfect. Harper, my older sister, would be screaming 'Green light, go!' at the top of her lungs, and Heather, my younger sister, would be kicking my seat until I stepped on the gas."

“Are you talking about when you guys were younger?”

“If by younger, you mean a few months ago, then yes.”

She laughs. “They sound like fun. I can’t wait to meet them... assuming you want me to meet them.”

“Of course, I do. I told them this morning about you. They sent me a dozen texts each, half of them in all caps yelling at me for not telling them we got married yesterday and the other half asking me about you.” I pause, wondering about the uncertainty I picked up in her voice.

“Why would you think I wouldn’t want you to meet my sisters?”

You’re my wife, the most important person in the world to me.

I’d send out a company-wide email announcing our relationship status if you’d let me. ”

“I’m pretty sure neither the HR nor IT folks would be okay with you doing that.”

“Then people will just have to find out one by one when they see this.” I flash my wedding band at her for a split second before grabbing the steering wheel again.

“I thought we weren’t going to wear our rings to the office?” She gasps. “Is it because yours is too tight and you couldn’t take it off? I know a method you can try; I read about it in a rom-com. You just stick your hand in a bowl of ice water?—”

“The ring fits fine,” I gently interrupt her as we turn onto the corporate campus.

I find the closest open spot to park in, then shut off the engine.

Facing her, I say, “I’m keeping my ring on because I’m proud to be married to the most gorgeous, smartest, kindest, and sexiest woman alive.

I don’t want to hide the fact that I’m off the market.

You wouldn’t want other women going after your husband, would you? ”

“Of course not. But...”

“But what?”

“You and I have an agreement. This marriage of convenience is only supposed to be until January. I don’t expect you to stay longer than that.”

My chest tightens. I suppose we should have done more talking than kissing yesterday.

“I’m not going anywhere, Lil. I went into this marriage hoping that it would last longer than three months.

I want to be married to you. I thought last night made that pretty clear.

I wouldn’t have spent all that time kissing you if I wasn’t serious. ”

She shrugs. “I thought maybe you got caught up in the moment, you know, after I saved your eyeballs and everything. You did say you wanted to show me your gratitude.”

“The gratitude was in the first kiss. After that, it was all for pleasure.” I cup her chin and lock gazes with her. “It was a man kissing the woman he loves.”

“How are you so sure?” Her eyes narrow suspiciously like someone who doesn’t believe that rebooting solves 99% of computer problems. “You hardly know me. Sure, we’ve worked together for a year, but is that really long enough for you to know you want to be stuck with me for the rest of your life?”

We’re not characters in a romance book, Hunter; this is real.

You shouldn’t make a rash decision like this without considering what it all means.

“Last night was amazing,” she admits with pink cheeks, “but marriage isn’t only about kissing. It’s a lot more, like dealing with my parents, especially my mother, who, by the way, wants us to go over for dinner tomorrow. She left me the longest voicemail ever; it was almost ten minutes.”

“Ten? I thought the maximum length of a voicemail you can leave is four minutes?”

“It is. She left three voicemails, but it was one big, long guilt trip. She started off by telling me for the umpteenth time about the thirty-six hours of labor she endured to have me, then ended with her last check-up where the doctor advised her to cut down on her stress, specifically stress related to her kids. It was quite the mom-ologue, I tell you.”

I wince to hear Lily break out with a pun, but I think I’m starting to understand her hesitation.

“I know we’re still getting to know each other, Lil, so it makes sense that you don’t trust me fully yet.

I get it. But I want you to know that I’m going to do everything in my power to show you that you can trust me.

No matter what comes our way, whether it's guilt trips, family dinners with your parents, or anything else, I'm going to be by your side. You can't scare me that easily."

"Says the man who freaked out about his contact lenses getting stuck to his eyeballs." Lily shoots me a knowing look, followed by a sweet smile.

"I appreciate how hard you're trying, I do.

But we pretty much did things backwards; we got married without even going on a date together.

It's not fair of me to expect you to stay.

You deserve a way out; it's the right thing to do. "

The steely glint in her deep brown eyes should scare me, but it only makes my heart beat faster. "You know something? You're cute when you're determined."

"Hunter, be serious!"

"I am. Seriously in love with you."

Her eyes widen in frustration. "Please think about it."

My operating system goes on the fritz the longer Lily looks at me. "About what again?"

"Your way out of this marriage of convenience."

"What if I don't want one?"

“Then you can choose to stay.”

“I’m staying then.”

“ After you take some time to think about it. Like, really think about it. Please. Will you do that for me?”

“I’d do anything for you, Lil, but?—”

“Then do this for me. Do it for yourself, too. This is the rest of your life that we’re talking about.” She gathers her belongings, then rests her hand on the door handle. “Your meeting is about to start. Go in first, then I’ll come in a few minutes after you. And remember to act normal.”

“Normal how?”

“Not like someone who married his coworker yesterday. Just be yourself.”

Be myself? I can totally do that. Because who I am is a man in love with his wife.

I lean over the center console and plant my mouth firmly on Lily’s.

She makes a sound of surprise before she responds and cups my face with her soft hands.

We move at a slow, unhurried pace, savoring the heat building between us.

There’s a sense of longing in this parting kiss as our lips linger for a few extra beats.

I don’t mind it at all. The more Lily enjoys kissing me, the more she’ll miss me when we’re apart.

When the moment is over, I'm surprised to see that several minutes have passed.

But what's more alarming is the small crowd gathered outside our car—although it's debatable whether they're more shocked or we are.

Several of our fellow engineers have their jaws dropped like they can't believe I got Lily to kiss me.

If I wasn't a first-hand eyewitness, I might not believe it either.

"Noooo!" Lily groans when she spots the scene through her window. Her cheeks flush as she slides lower in her seat. "Please tell me I'm dreaming!"

"You're totally dreaming."

She glowers at me, apparently unamused.

"Okay, you're not really dreaming, but the situation's not as bad as you may think.

Look, a couple of the guys are giving us a thumbs-up.

That's a good thing, right? But the best part is now that our relationship is public, we can walk into the office together.

"I get out and greet our coworkers, then round the front of the car to Lily's side.

After opening the door, I extend my hand to her. "Come on."

She hesitates before accepting my invitation. Once she steps out, she takes a deep breath and looks around. The guys have gone ahead of us, so we no longer have an audience. "Where'd everyone go?"

“Most likely to the meeting that’s starting in two minutes.”

“That’s your meeting, too. You should hurry.” She gestures for me to walk ahead.

“I’m going to stop by the cafeteria and get some tea. ”

I nod and reluctantly let go of her hand. “I have meetings all morning, so I’ll see you for lunch?”

She avoids my gaze as she replies, “I have a lot of work to catch up on, so I’ll probably eat at my desk.”

“I can bring lunch to your cube then.”

An unreadable emotion passes over her face as she meets my eyes. “Can I let you know later?”

“Yeah, sure. I better get to the meeting. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Leaving Lily behind, I force my feet to move in the direction of the main building. Nothing about our interaction just now sits right with me, but I’ll have to wait until later to debug the problem.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“You know that tingly little feeling you get when you like someone? That is your common sense leaving your body.” ~Unknown

I think I’m having another malfunction, but this time it’s the blue screen of death kind.

Not only is my mind jumbled, my body’s acting like it’s going through puberty all over again.

My emotions and skin are a mess—thank the Lord for good concealer—and I’m as angsty and dramatic as my former fifteen-year-old self.

One minute I’m happy and hopeful; the next minute I’m ready to write depressing haikus and wear all black.

There’s no reasoning with myself either.

Things are going too perfectly, which means it’s only a matter of time before the other shoe drops.

And no doubt it’ll be my favorite leopard print wedge sandal that faces its demise.

My shoulders sag with worry. I can’t shake the thought that Hunter’s going to realize he made a mistake marrying me and he’ll change his mind about staying.

That's why I want to give him an out first. In any sport, it's better to play offense than defense, right?

At least it seems to be in theory. My idea of athleticism is juggling two boba teas in one hand.

Since our cafeteria only has coffee and hot tea this early in the morning, I grab a cup of chai, then head over to one of the company's "quiet rooms." There's no better place to think and pray, especially when I need to be alone for a few minutes.

I soon make myself comfortable in one of the blue-themed spaces, leaning back on a large bean bag and staring up at the mirrored ceiling.

A minute passes as I focus on breathing in and out.

Memories of the day before play in my head, making my pulse race.

I thought I'd be more relieved today. After all, I made Jasmine's wish come true.

But I never expected this marriage of convenience to produce real feelings... and real fears.

My phone suddenly buzzes in my pocket with a new text. Lily, why did I have to hear from Hadley that you got married?! What's going on?

It's from my friend Hope, the only one in our book club who's married. She's a fifth-grade teacher in the Bay Area, and her hubby is Amelia's younger brother (yes, their relationship was a surprise to us all). I quickly start typing: Sorry, I was going to tell you guys, but ? —

The screen lights up with an incoming call from Hope. "Hey, Hope. I was just

replying to you.”

“I know. I saw the text bubbles, but I thought it’d be faster to call.”

“Don’t you have work today?”

“I took the day off. I’ve been extremely nauseous, so I likely can’t talk too long. If the line goes silent, it’s because I’m rushing to the porcelain throne.”

“Oh no. Do you have the stomach flu or food poisoning? ”

“Nope and nope. It’s related to something more long term. Like for the next eighteen years or more.”

I gasp as I catch on to her hint. “You’re pregnant?! How exciting! Congratulations!”

“I could say the same to you! How did you go from being fake engaged to being a married woman? Hadley said she saw you and Hunter kiss! As my students would say, I need all the deets.”

I cover my eyes, so I don’t have to stare at my grimacing face reflected in the ceiling.

Where do I start? “The condensed version is that my mother wasn’t satisfied with me only being engaged.

I had to get married so my sister could start planning her wedding.

Then Hunter offered to have a marriage of convenience with me for three months, but now it’s kind of turned into a marriage of inconvenience. ”

“Marriage of inconvenience? Is that a new trope?”

“It’s a long story. Let’s just say that we’re both having some real, unexpected feelings.

Now Hunter says he wants to stay married, but I know it’ll only be a matter of time before the honeymoon period ends and he wants out.

So, I told him to take some time to think about this.

I don’t want him to regret his decision. ”

Silence comes over the line before Hope bursts out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I ask. I’ve heard of pregnancy hormones causing mood swings, but do they produce laughing episodes, too? “Did I miss something?”

“I just can’t believe how funny God is. This is like déjà vu, Lily. We had this exact same conversation about me and Shane. Remember how I called you up early one morning last summer because I couldn’t sleep?”

“Yeah.”

“And I told you that Shane said he liked me, and I liked him, too, but I was freaking out about the whole thing and didn’t know what to do, and you said it was because I was afraid of commitment.”

“Mm-hmm. But my situation’s different. I’m not afraid of commitment.”

“What are you afraid of then?”

A long sigh pops out of me like I’m a deflating balloon. “It’s what I’m always afraid of, that I’m not good enough.”

“Oh, Lily, that is so far from the truth. You’re so amazing. You’re the smartest person I know and the most fashionable. And you’re such a good friend.”

“You’re saying all of that because you’re such a good friend.”

“Uh-uh. You’re not going to redirect the conversation like you always do when you get a compliment.”

“I was only speaking the truth.”

“So was I. And part of that truth is that you also give great advice. It was you who asked me how I was so sure that Shane wasn’t the right guy for me. It’s my turn now to ask you—how do you know Hunter isn’t Mr. Right?”

“That’s the thing. He’s not just Mr. Right, he’s Mr. Perfect.” I go on to relay all the things that Hunter’s good at, from baking cookies to planning the best date. “He even kisses well!”

Hope shrieks in delight. “You guys obviously have chemistry. And he takes such good care of you! I don’t see what the problem is. I’d be a lot more worried if he didn’t treat you well.”

“When you put it that way...” I groan and flip onto my stomach, face-planting into the memory foam cushion. Turning my head enough so I can talk, I continue processing out loud to Hope. “Logically speaking, this is the best possible outcome—for me. Not so much for Hunter. ”

“Why not for him? You said he wants to stay married. I hate to say it, but you’re not making any sense at all. And you usually make a lot of sense.”

“It’s because there are feelings involved. I’m good when there are only ones and

zeroes, but I can't think straight when I feel so much. Why does love have to be so... illogical?"

Hope chuckles. The pleasant sound is soon followed by a gagging noise. "Let me know when you figure it out! I gotta run!"

I drop my phone onto the carpet, feeling more confused than ever.

What is my problem anyway? I should be happy and grateful that Hunter likes me.

I suppose a big part of me doesn't believe I deserve a guy like him.

He's so sweet, genuine, and funny. He loves the Lord.

An added perk is that he's also tall—so tall that I can wear heels and still feel small next to him.

He's basically everything I could have asked God for, and poof—I just get to have him as my husband, no questions asked?

Well, I've got a lot of questions.

Why me? What did I do to deserve this? How did my wild idea of marrying my coworker turn into the best thing to ever happen to me?

I flip onto my back again, and the answer hits me—literally.

My company badge, that is. The lanyard that it hangs from gets caught around my shoulder, so I flop around like a hot dog on a roller grill until it loosens enough for the rectangular card to fly into the air.

I watch it fall as if in slow motion until it smacks me right in the face.

Ack!

This rude awakening is probably a sign that I should get to work, but I wonder if it's also God trying to tell me something. When I hold up my badge, my gaze automatically goes to my name. Lily Grace Lam.

Our company has a weird tradition of putting employees' full names on their badges.

This is in case there's ever two people with the same first and last names.

I always thought it was unnecessary until I met three David Wangs and two Amy Changs in the office.

But today, I'm extra thankful for this reminder of my middle name.

Grace. Unmerited favor.

That's the only reason why anything good happens to me at all. I'm not perfect, not even close to it, but the Lord sees Jesus when He looks at me, so it doesn't matter how good I am. Grace isn't earned, it's given. I just need to receive it. I. Just. Need. To. Receive. It!

Duh!

It figures that I'd need to be hit on the head for this truth to sink into my thick skull.

But now that I have been, the idea of receiving Hunter as God's gift to me makes a lot of sense.

It feels like my birthday and Christmas rolled into one but also the Fourth of July because there's a sense of freedom in my heart that wasn't there before.

All my life I've been an overachiever so I could get the best scores and grades and the praise of my parents.

I may have deserved those accolades because I'd worked for them, but I certainly didn't do anything to earn Hunter's love.

Which is all the more reason for me to treasure it and to not take it for granted.

To not take him for granted.

I scramble to my feet and grab my belongings.

This feels like one of those aha moments in a romance story where the hero or heroine realizes they want to be with the other person.

A lot of times, I, as the reader, can see so clearly what the hold-up is and wish I could shake some sense into the characters because I know they're perfect for each other.

Maybe a reader would think that I deserve a good shake, too, but at least I figured things out before Hunter could take off on a plane, train, or boat for a faraway land, never to be heard from again.

That has to count for something, right? He's just temporarily stuck in meetings all morning, which some might say is the same as being out of reach.

But this does give me time to put a little plan into place, one that will let Hunter—and the rest of the world—know where I stand.

My first stop is the cafeteria, where I'll be picking up some bagels.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

“I love you like I love Wi-Fi—if you disappear for too long, I start to feel lost.”

~Unknown

I feel like a prisoner—or at least a guy who got banished to a distant land.

It’s not that I hate my job. Most days, I enjoy staring at a computer monitor for hours on end or talking tech with my colleagues, but today’s not one of those days.

After almost four hours of sitting, my mind—and behind—are beat.

I’m ready to go to management and ask if we can have our meetings lying down from now on.

I can’t wait to get up, stretch my legs, and take a long break.

The only thing I’m looking forward to more is spending time with my wife. Assuming Lily will want to see me.

Now that I’ve had the whole morning to process what she said, I’m starting to understand her concerns.

We did do things a bit backwards. Usually, a man and a woman have a few awkward conversations, then some semi-awkward dates before they decide to commit to a relationship.

In our case, we tripled the awkwardness by getting married first. Since then, my foot has been on the gas, revving the engine so we can speed forward while Lily's still stepping on the brake. No wonder we're stalled.

Thank the Lord that He's opened up my eyes to the situation we're in.

Back-to-back meetings can do that to a person.

When you have all the time in the world with nowhere to go, you start ruminating.

It's like marinating, just less tasty, but the result is the same.

You come away with a more tender and mature understanding.

This marriage isn't only about me and my wants; it's about Lily's.

And if she needs me to slow down, that's what I'll do.

Sloth-mode has officially been activated.

I take my wedding band off my left ring finger and move it to my right hand. Next, I open up my phone and go to my social media accounts. I'd jumped the gun and updated my status to "married" yesterday. I now switch it to "in a relationship" and hope no one notices and questions the change.

Oops, too late.

A message hits my inbox just seconds after I make the update, and it's ironically enough from Lily.

Hey @GeekyGirlsRule, I don't mean to be stalking you, but I just happened to see

your new relationship status. I hope everything's ok?

Maybe now would be a good time to let Lily know that I'm the one who's been stalking her with my incognito username?

Things are good, thanks for asking. Just a little complicated, I answer back.

Lily: It's ok if you don't want to go into details. I get it. Matters of the heart are not easy to make sense of. I'll be praying for you to figure things out.

Her reply makes me smile. I could use the prayers. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Lily: Anytime! Oh, and I just remembered that I forgot to share the pumpkin brownie recipe I told you about in my last live video. I'll ask my hubby for it and get it up soon.

My jaw drops. Did Lily just let the cat out of the bag? Not just one but the whole clowder? What happened to keeping our marriage a secret? I quickly type back: You got married??

Lily: I did!! You're the first online friend I've told. I just logged on to update my status. I'll do a video sometime and tell you guys more about him. Maybe even ask him to join me if he doesn't mind.

Of course I don't mind, is what I want to reply, but I reply with this instead: Congratulations. He's a lucky guy.

Lily: Aww, thanks. But I'm the lucky one. I'm so blessed to be his wife. He's the best gift God's given to me. God knew exactly what I needed. I know God sees your needs, too, and will provide for you. I gotta go, but I'll be praying for you!

A lump grows in my throat as I reread her message. I'm not sure what changed for Lily, but she seems to be happier and more at peace with our situation. Which makes me happier and more at peace.

With a grateful heart, I reply: Thanks for the reminder, Lil.

"Anything you want to add, Hunter?"

My head whips up at the mention of my name. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I asked if there's anything you want to share with us before we end the meeting." My manager, Al, looks across the rectangular table at me. He adjusts his horn-rimmed glasses as he gives me a cheeky smile. "Speak now or forever hold your peace."

A couple of our coworkers chuckle. I'm starting to realize why everyone around the room is giving me knowing glances. "I suppose it's time to address the elephant in the room, namely me." I raise my left hand and say, "I'm officially off the market."

Al narrows his eyes and frowns. "Either my eyesight is failing me, or invisible rings are a new tech I don't know about?"

"Oh, my bad!" I switch my wedding band over to the correct hand, then hold it up again. "Let's try that again. I, Hunter Payne, am a married man now."

Al gives me a thumbs-up. "It's about time. I'm glad your persistence paid off and you were able to win Lily over."

I blink in surprise. "Was it that obvious that I liked her?"

"Only to the trained eye." He winks as he stands up. "Meeting's over. Go get some

lunch, guys.”

Everyone scrambles out of their seats, then heads for the door.

I try to get up as well, but my whole right leg and foot are numb.

Oh, the joys of being tall. The sensation of pins and needles attacks me, spreading throughout my limb.

I brace myself against the table and wiggle my toes inside my sneaker to get the blood flowing.

Once I regain some feeling in my little piggies, I start rotating my ankle.

Next, it comes time to stomp my foot, then swing my leg back and forth.

This happens so often, I’ve gotten a routine down, or half a routine since it only involves one leg.

Someday, I’ll add in some jazz hands and spins and choreograph a whole dance.

For now, though, my goal is to get moving so I can find Lily.

“Hunter? What are you doing?”

Glancing up, I see my gorgeous wife standing in the doorway with a bewildered look on her face. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s third-guessing her decision to marry me right about now. “Uh, my leg fell asleep. I’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

She rushes over, then kneels beside me. “Have a seat. I’ll try not to hurt you.”

“H-hurt me?” I do as I’m told, albeit slowly. I give her a helpless smile as I take a seat. “What do you have in mind? ”

“Don’t worry. Just relax. You’ll be fine.”

I swallow hard. “That sounds exactly like something dentists say before they bring out the drill.”

Her dark brown eyes light up as she smirks. “Do you trust me?”

“I think so.”

“Good.”

With both of her hands, she starts massaging my leg.

Her fingers and thumbs work in circular motions, applying just the right amount of pressure to knead my muscles.

Soon, tingles travel up and down my calf as the feeling comes back.

The relief is so tangible, I release a happy sigh.

“You’re amazing, Lil! How are you so good at this? ”

“I do this for my Ye Ye,” she says, referring to her paternal grandfather, “whenever he comes to visit. His legs fall asleep every time he sits too long. It’s common for people like you.”

“People like me? You mean old?”

She laughs. “No, I mean tall. He’s almost your height.”

“Oh, okay, that makes sense.” I pull out the chair beside me and gesture for her to sit down. “Thank you for coming to my rescue yet again. First, the contact lenses and now my leg. I’m like a system badly in need of a hardware update.”

“I don’t mind,” she replies with a kind smile. “I happen to like your hardware.”

I blink in surprise at how forward Lily’s being. “You like my hardware?”

“I was going along with the metaphor you started.” Her cheeks turn rosy pink as she bites her lower lip. “Yes, you have great hardware, but I personally think your software’s more important. You know, like what’s in your heart. You keep surprising me, Hunter—or should I call you @GeekyGirlsRule?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“I know it’s you behind that username.”

“You do? How?”

“Just now when we were messaging each other, you called me Lil. No one besides you calls me that. I was also thinking back to all the times we’d chatted online, and everything made sense.

You followed my account about a year ago, which was around the time you started working here.

You never ask for makeup or fashion advice.

You usually give me compliments and encourage me or you say you’re praying for

me.

You're not like any of my other viewers. That's how I know it's you."

I hold up my hands in surrender. "Well done, Sherlock. If you decide to quit engineering one day, you could become a detective."

"Only if you'll be my Watson."

"Deal."

A wistful smile curves her lips. "There's something I want to elaborate on about what I said earlier in my messages to you. About me being your wife."

"Go on."

"I should have told you this before. The real reason why I was trying to give you a way out of our marriage of convenience was because I didn't think I deserve you."

"Why would you think that? That's so far from the truth."

"Probably because my mom keeps saying you're better than me.

Not that I usually let what she says dictate how I feel, but sometimes her comments have a way of sneaking under my skin.

It's hard to compete with you, Hunter. You're smarter than me and more talented, too.

You're almost even more Chinese than me, which is not something I thought was possible.

” She rolls her eyes playfully. “I love all these things about you though, and I feel so blessed that you think enough of me to want to be with me. I do want to stay married to you. I’m not going to push you away anymore, I promise. ”

“That’s a relief to hear because I never want to be away from you, Lil.” I take both of her hands in mine. “And you’ve got it all wrong. From the first day we met, you’ve been a blessing to me, more than you know. Remember that day?”

She nods. “For some reason you kept asking me to repeat my name.”

“That’s because during the whole process of moving here and starting this job, I’d been holding onto those verses in Matthew 6 that talk about worry.

I remember looking up photos of lilies and seeing how beautiful they are.

Then I met you, and not only did your name remind me not to worry, you were the most beautiful woman I’d ever met.

So beautiful that I couldn’t even speak, and the only thing that saved me from utter humiliation was that intern stuffing a bagel into my mouth.

That’s why I got used to carrying one around with me in the office in case I found myself in another speechless moment. ”

“It’s not because you like bagels?”

I wince. “I’m actually more of a donut guy, but bagels take longer to chew so they were a better option.”

Lily breaks into a big grin as she squeezes my hands. “You are so adorable. I didn’t think I could love you more, but I was wrong.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I didn’t think—” She eyes me suspiciously. “Are you trying to get me to say I love you again?”

I bite back a smile. “Is that what you said? I didn’t know if I heard you correctly.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But even if I didn’t, the truth is that I love you, too.”

“Come again?” She laughs at my unamused expression. “Okay, you don’t have to say it, but I’d be open to you showing me your answer.”

She doesn’t have to ask twice. I pull Lily onto my lap and close the gap between us.

Her lips, so soft and insistent, warm me to the core as she presses them to mine.

I cradle the small of her back and marvel at how her curves fit so perfectly against my body.

As we kiss, we move together to our own rhythm, creating a harmony that only we can hear?—

“Ahem!”

Or maybe not.

We break apart to find Al standing in the doorway with a couple of people crowded behind him. Apparently, the music Lily and I make is so powerful, it attracted an audience.

Al raises a bushy brow. “Seriously, you two, get a room. Just preferably not this one. We have another meeting starting now, which you’re both welcome to stay for if you can’t get enough of my yappin’.”

“No, we’re good!” Lily and I reply in unison, which gets us both smiling. We hop to our feet and scurry out of there like Bonnie and Clyde—except for the notorious criminal activity part, of course.

Walking hand in hand back to our cubicles, Lily surprises me by pulling me toward mine first. My eyes widen when I spot a plate of bagels next to my laptop. There are also a dozen pictures of cartoon bagels taped all around my desk. Printed on each one is a funny pun.

“What’s all this?” I ask Lily.

“It’s my way of letting everyone know that you’re my bae-gel.” She gestures to one drawing that has the words Bae-gel: Before Anyone Else. “Some of these are a bit cheesy, so if you want to take them down, I understand.”

“No way!” I shake my head adamantly. “I love cheese. The more the better. I’m leaving these up forever. Especially this one.” I point to my favorite pun: Are you a bagel? Because you’re everything I never knew I kneaded . “I love all of them, Lil. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you like puns because you’re going to be in for a treat when we go to dinner tomorrow. I’m already preparing my arsenal, and it’s going to be cheesier than ever.”

I loop my arms around her waist and offer her a confident grin. “Don’t worry. Everything’s gouda be fine.”

She groans. “That’s so bad, it’s good.”

“I have more where that came from.” I tap the tip of her nose. “I also have an idea. Why don’t we bring more dried seafood for your mom? We can buy some after work.”

“Good thinking. That’d be a lot easier than giving her a grandchild.”

My brows shoot up. “What did you say?”

“Oh yeah. That was minute seven of her voicemail. She thinks having a grandbaby in her life will make her stress go away. Don’t worry, it’s all talk... I think. Anyhow, we should get back to work.”

Lily pats my shoulder, then leaves me standing in my cubicle with thoughts of little Hunter and Lily bagels running through my mind. Oh boy (and girl). I have a feeling it’s going to be an interesting family dinner.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Lily

“Why is a computer so smart? Because it listens to its motherboard.” ~Unknown

Hunter is a saint. Or maybe he hasn't had enough exposure to my family yet. Either way, I couldn't be more grateful to have him by my side tonight. Let's just hope all my mom's baby talk doesn't make him hyperventilate.

That's her talking about babies, not talking like a baby. Although I wouldn't put it past her to start.

“Don't you think Auntie Ling's granddaughter is so precious?” She holds up a photo of a newborn sleeping in a basket with a miniature crown balanced on top of her head. “Doesn't this picture make you want to have a baby just like this one?”

I shoot an exasperated look at Hunter who just stuffed a bite of rice into his mouth.

He returns a knowing glance and quickly chews his food, all the while giving my leg a pat underneath the table.

Not wanting him to choke, I jump in to give my mom an answer that I hope will satisfy her. “Maybe someday, Ma, but not right now.”

“But I am not getting any younger.” She sighs dramatically as she flips through the album on the dining table.

Yes, she wants grandkids so much, she's made a whole photo book of other people's

pride and joy.

Shaking her head, she meets my gaze. “How do you expect me to help take care of your children if I am too old?”

My father makes a sympathetic noise. He doesn’t say much since he’s used to being around non-talkative patients all day and also because he values a peaceful home. He’s the OG saint.

The other people at the dinner table are Jasmine and Bruce who have been strangely quiet all evening. I wonder if they’ve had an argument, but it doesn’t seem likely since they keep glancing at each other like they have a secret.

Hunter speaks up, breaking the momentary silence. “Ah yi, that is very kind of you to offer to help with our kids. Lily and I appreciate it, and we will of course take what you said into consideration when we start planning for a family.”

Oh no. My hubby doesn’t know it yet, but he just opened up Mama Lam’s Box. Never mention the word planning unless you want to see my mother wield her multitasking sword.

“What Hunter means is that we haven’t even thought about kids yet, but we will sometime in the future?—”

“You do not need to worry!” my mother cuts me off with a smile that’s a little too eager. “I will help you plan! You know that’s what I’m good at.”

My father makes an agreeable sound this time. Agreeable, both in the sense that he acknowledges my mother’s abilities, and he believes in keeping the peace. He’s so patient, he puts the long in long-suffering.

Jasmine, on the other hand, is not so adept at keeping her thoughts and feelings to herself when it comes to our mother.

She can say and do things that I'd never dream of and get away with them.

I'm pretty sure it's a God-given, younger-child perk to make up for all the times they get bossed around by older siblings.

As usual, Jasmine is the only person brave enough to tell our mother the truth.

She does it with tact though. "Ma, Jie just got married a few days ago. She and Hunter need time to get used to each other before kids enter the picture. If they'd been dating for a while like me and Bruce, that would be a different story."

"But they have been working together for a year," Ma states, holding up an index finger. "One year. That's 365 days, 8760 hours, 525,600 minutes, and 31,536,000 seconds. That's a lot of time!"

Hunter's jaw drops. "How did she do that?!" he whispers to me. "Your mom's a human calculator."

"She memorized the numbers," I murmur back. "She's done this spiel before."

His eyes widen, but he still looks impressed.

I give him about three weeks before the novelty wears off.

That's about 168% longer than the amount of time that our gift of dried seafood was able to appease my mother.

I stuff a shrimp into my mouth and focus on chewing, which is much more productive

than trying to plead our case.

It's better to let my mother say her piece, so the rest of us can get our peace.

Jasmine, however, isn't ready to let things go. She sets her chopsticks down onto her rice bowl and clears her throat. "Ma, Ba, and Jie, there's something I need to say."

We all stop eating and direct our attention to her. Whatever she wants to announce must be serious because Bruce's face is as white as the cold tofu appetizer dish.

"Jie," she addresses me first, "you've always been such a good big sister to me, even if you are a little bossy sometimes and you make a stink when I try to borrow your clothes?—"

"Because you never return them," I pipe up in exasperation, "but go on."

"I don't take it for granted that you always want what's best for me and your clothes," she adds with a sheepish smile. "I feel like you do so much for me, so I want to do something for you. Please don't get mad, okay?"

My gut twists. "Okay, but can I be scared?"

"Trust me."

Great. What person ever trusts someone when they say, "trust me"?

"Ma and Ba," Jasmine says as she holds up her left hand, "Bruce and I eloped."

One by one, our mouths fall open. Next to my sister's engagement ring is a silver wedding band. Bruce sheepishly holds up his hand as well to show off his matching ring.

“Aiya!” our mother yelps as if in shock.

Or I should say in shock. There is no if about this situation.

“Why did you do that? What about the wedding? You already put a deposit on the venue. And I already told my sisters and mahjong friends about the banquet menu. Everyone is looking forward to the big day!”

My father grunts, I believe in agreement. He looks as confused as everyone else.

“Don’t worry, we’ll still have the wedding and the banquet.

” Jasmine’s tone is casual and reassuring, like she’s talking about coupons and not the fact that if she’d eloped sometime during the last two years, I wouldn’t have had to enter a marriage of convenience.

She turns to me with an apologetic frown.

“Thanks, Jie, for trying so hard to help me get married. I don’t know why I didn’t think of doing this earlier.

But now that Bruce and I are hitched, you and Hunter can end your contract marriage.

You don’t have to stay married on account of us. ”

My mother clutches her chest and exclaims, “Contract marriage?!”

Jasmine nods. “Jie and Hunter agreed to stay married until Bruce and I got married. But now they don’t have to.”

“Is this true, Lily?” Ma demands. “You and Hunter do not love each other?”

“Yes...”

Hunter gasps. “Lil?”

“I mean no!” I try again. “It’s true that Hunter and I had an agreement, but things have changed. We do love each other, and we want to stay married.”

Hunter’s expression softens as he grabs my hand. “Oh, thank God. You had me worried for a second.”

I squeeze his hand and mouth the word sorry .

“Wait, you guys love each other?” Jasmine claps her hands. “That’s awesome! I’m so happy for you, Jie! You, too, Hunter!”

My father even chimes in with his own, “Good, good,” and gives Hunter and I two thumbs-up.

The only person who is quiet is my mother.

She seems deep in thought with her brows furrowed.

Or maybe she’s shocked that I did something so unconventional or angry that I had intended to find a way around the rules.

Whatever the reason may be, her silence is deafening.

Or it could be my heartbeat resounding in my ears.

The wait nearly does me in. I’m so antsy, I’m sure I put the suffering in long-suffering.

I chance a glance her way. To my utter disbelief, my mother has a smile on her face. It's not so much a sign of happiness but maybe pride? She doesn't say anything to me, though. Instead, she directs her next words at Hunter.

“You be sure to treat our daughter well. She is a you xiu nu er .”

My eyes well up. Hearing my mother refer to me as an excellent daughter makes me think of doing complex integrals in my head.

It seems improbable and it makes your head hurt in the process, but the solution is also satisfying and worth the effort.

I suppose I finally got an A in my mother's grade book.

Hunter looks at me, then back at my mother, and says, “I will. I promise. Thank you for raising such a you xiu nu er and trusting her with me.”

I almost laugh when I hear the phrase for a second time in a minute. At this rate, Hunter's going to have to tear down his door to make room for my inflated head. I wave away their compliments with a grin. “Ma, now you can start encouraging Mei and Bruce to make you a grandma.”

“You are right!” My mother's dark brown eyes sparkle as she looks at her next victims.

“Good one, Lil,” Hunter murmurs in my ear as the attention shifts away from us.

“Although I wouldn't mind planning for the future with you.

We can call our kids bagel holes or maybe bagel dots?

Did you know you can put cream cheese in the center of them or roll them around in sugar or dried herbs? The food, not the kids...”

My heart is completely full as I listen to Hunter talk. Who knew this dinner would turn out to be pleasant? As my gaze travels around the table, I am in awe of all the grace God has shown to me and my family. There couldn't be a better happily ever after for this story.

I, Lily Lam, know that I am blessed and loved even though I'm not perfect. And that's perfectly okay with me.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:59 am

Hunter

“We're all a little weird. And life is a little weird. And when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall into mutually satisfying weirdness—and call it love—true love.” ~Robert Fulghum

It's a rainy Friday evening and the perfect time for a Lord of the Rings marathon, but I'm checking my reflection in the phone screen instead.

It's my and Lily's first live video together and my first live video ever.

This mug of mine has never been seen in action on social media before.

I'm not going to lie—the thought of viewers watching my every move has me more nervous than the time I got my contact lenses stuck to my eyeballs.

The only saving grace is that I know I'm not alone on this adventure.

My beautiful, wonderful wife is sitting right beside me...

looking as unbothered as cream cheese on a bagel.

Man, all these nerves are making me hungry.

“You look great, Hun,” Lily pipes up as she looks my way. “Just be yourself. Everyone's going to love you.”

I gulp, then blow out a long breath. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re a natural on camera. I’ll probably forget my own name.”

“What should I call you then? How about Trapper or Chaser?”

The mischief lighting up her brown eyes makes me chuckle.

Over the past five months that we’ve been married, I’ve seen some new sides to Lily.

Other than her soft, vulnerable side, her playful, jokey side has to be my favorite.

I scoot closer to her on the loveseat and wrap my arm around her shoulders.

“I should have never given you a thesaurus for Christmas. It was supposed to be a fun stocking stuffer, not a torture device.”

“It is fun! For me,” she adds with a grin. “Next time just get me some synonym rolls.”

I groan loudly. “I think you’re more punny than me now.”

“I learn from the best.” She leans in and kisses my cheek, then rubs it with her thumb.

“Oops, I left some lipstick on you. I guess this one’s not as transfer-proof as I thought. Let me touch it up before we start.”

“Before you do that...”

“Huh?”

I cup her chin and tilt her face up toward me. Taking my chance, I plant a quick one on her, then let her go. “I’ve been wanting to kiss you, but I didn’t want to mess up your makeup. But since you need to fix your lipstick anyway?—”

Lily cuts off the rest of my words with a finger to my lips. “ This is what I love about your brain. You have the best ideas.”

I can’t argue with her once her mouth finds its way home to mine, and I wouldn’t want to.

Lily is right, I do come up with good ideas.

Kissing my wife ranks high on that list, along with the proposal I’d surprised her with the week after our civil ceremony.

It was important to me that I ask Lily to marry me since we’d done things a bit unconventionally.

Once the engagement ring was on her finger, our union became more official than a contract marriage.

Soon after the new year, we had a church ceremony with our families and friends present, as well as a ten-course Chinese banquet.

Both events were shared with Jasmine and Bruce, much to Mama Lam’s dismay since that cut down on the number of festivities.

She quickly got on board, however, when Lily and Jasmine reminded her that there will be man yue dinners (aka one-month baby celebrations) to look forward to once the grandkids come along.

In case anyone’s wondering, Lily and I have gotten very familiar with each other since we decided to stay married.

So familiar that I know exactly how she likes to be kissed.

Slowly and thoroughly along the curve of her neck as I lay her back onto the couch cushions.

I can also anticipate the sounds of her happy sighs and the way she likes to run her fingers through my hair until our lips meet again.

Our connection deepens, giving me a sweet taste of her.

I have every urge to move our kissing to the bedroom, but I know now's not the time.

Reluctantly, I break off the kiss and help Lily up.

"Business first, Mrs. Payne. Your fans are waiting."

"The live! I almost forgot about that. Let me go fix my lipstick!"

A couple of minutes later, we're good to start. As soon as we go live, a handful of viewers tune in. Lily's warm and caring personality shines through as she calls each person out by name.

"Hey, Heidi. Gina, hi! Patty, long time no see. I'm so glad you guys made it!"

I watch in awe as she reads and replies to their comments without missing a beat. What can't she do?! My wife is amazing. Every time I see Lily in her element, I fall a little more in love with her.

"Guess what, everyone?" Lily continues. "I have a special guest I want you all to meet. This is my hubby, Hunter!"

The feedback starts appearing on the screen.

Oh, he's cute!

I can't believe you're married!

Are his ears okay? They're so red!

"He is cute, isn't he? Especially his ears!" Lily grins and gives my knee a comforting pat. "We'll get to everyone's questions in a bit, but let me give him a chance to say hi first."

"Hello, everyone," I greet the screen. "Thanks for tuning in and supporting my lovely wife. Lily's the best, isn't she?"

She waves off my compliment, but she does mouth thanks to me before turning back to the phone. "I compiled a list of questions that you guys wanted us to answer in our live today. We'll start with the first one—who fell in love first?"

"That's easy," I answer. "I did. It was pretty much love at first sight. From the moment I met Lily at work, I was a goner."

"I'll admit it, I friend-zoned Hunter pretty badly for a year. But once I did fall for him, I fell pretty hard and fast."

A bunch of heart emojis float across the screen.

"Next question," Lily continues, "what is your favorite thing about each other?"

"Oh boy, how much time do we have?" I ask. "We're going to be here all night. "

Lily rolls her eyes.

"You think I'm kidding?" I look into the camera and shake my head adamantly. "I'm a hundred percent serious, guys. There are so many things I love about my wife. I'll name three of them, so I don't embarrass her too much. Her brilliant mind, her tender

heart, and her sexy body?—”

“Hunter!” she exclaims as she covers her mouth. “I forgot to tell you my parents are watching.”

“They are?” I’m sure my ears are as red as Lily’s cheeks. Wearing a sheepish smile, I wave at the screen. “Hi, Ma and Ba. Thanks for supporting us.”

I have no idea what my in-laws think of me now if they are watching, but the viewers seem to like my answer.

He’s so sweet!

Swoon!

Where do I find a guy like Hunter?

“Moving on,” Lily says with a sheepish smile, “my favorite thing about Hunter is his unwavering faith in God and in me. He’s steady and consistent and someone I trust with my whole heart.”

“Thank you, Lil.” My chest swells with a sense of contentment.

Hearing her words gives me such a confidence boost. We’ve come so far in such a short amount of time, from strangers to semi-rivals, to semi-friends, then spouses.

I can’t wait to see where God takes us next.

I lean over and place a kiss on her forehead. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” Lily gives me a sweet smile as she announces, “Last question—what’s a secret you’ve been keeping from each other?”

“Come again? Did you say secret?”

“Yes.”

“A secret?” I’m not sure what to make of this question. “I don’t have any secrets. Do you?”

“I do. Just one, and I’ve only been keeping it since yesterday.”

“Interesting.” My brows shoot up. The sparkle in Lily’s eyes seems innocent enough, but I have no idea what to expect, which I suppose fits the definition of a secret.

I decide to do some troubleshooting. “How big of a secret are we talking about? On a scale of one to ten, ten being you got me a new GPU, to one being you changed the type of toilet paper we use, where does this secret fall?”

“For those of you who are interested, GPU stands for Graphics Processing Unit,” she explains to her viewers, “which is a specialized computer chip. I’d say this surprise ranks as a fifteen.”

“Fifteen, huh?”

More comments pop up on the screen, with the last one echoing my sentiment the most.

I think I know what it is!

I have a guess!

I have no clue, but I’m excited!

“Whatever it is, Lil, I’m game. Go ahead and tell me.”

“Close your eyes and hold out your hands.”

I do as I’m told. Pretty soon, something lands on my palms. Based on the material, I can tell it’s a basket.

While small, there’s a good weight to it.

What’s even more intriguing is its fragrance.

There are hints of garlic and various spices, along with sugar and cinnamon.

It’s an odd combination but a mouth-watering one.

“Are these bagels? My nose tells me they’re bagels. ”

“Go ahead and open your eyes.”

“I was right!” As my nose predicted, I’m the recipient of a basket of bagel holes with both savory and sweet flavors. “Thanks, Lil. This is a great surprise. ”

“I thought you’d like it, but there’s more. You might want to take a closer look at the card.”

I’m so enamored by the delicious smells, I don’t realize there’s a card in the basket, too.

I pick it up and examine the cartoon drawing.

There are two bagels with stick arms and legs, holding a bagel hole between them.

All three have smiling faces. Beneath the bagel figures are the words Get ready for a hole lotta cute.

I freeze as the gears in my brain start turning. A hole lotta cute... bagel hole... oh my! Realization sets in as I turn to Lily, my eyes as round as the bagel holes. “Are we going to be bagel parents? I mean human parents?”

“Yes!” Lily throws her arms around my neck, nearly squashing the basket. “Surprise!”

Disbelief hits me, but it’s soon followed by an adrenaline rush that gets my blood pumping all the way to the tips of my ears. I pull back to look Lily in the eyes. “This is the best surprise ever! Wait till my parents and sisters hear the news.”

“They just did. Look!” She points at the phone screen where dozens of congratulatory words are coming in. “I invited everyone, including our coworkers. This username must belong to Al.”

@YourPalAl: Congrats! I see you guys finally got your own room.

“I think you’re right.” I laugh. “Hey, Mom and Dad, and Ma and Ba. Our baby bagel’s going to have the best grandparents.”

Three new comments suddenly appear:

Ahem! What about the best aunts?

Yeah, man!

You can’t forget about us!

Lily gives me a pitying look. “You’re in big trouble with our sisters.”

“I’ll make it up to you guys! How about we let you babysit whenever you want?”

“Good one,” Lily remarks with a grin. “Thank you, guys, for all your warm wishes! Oh, I see the girls online, too. Hey, everyone, meet my book club girlfriends—Hope, Hadley, Janie, and Amelia! Maybe I’ll have them on sometime and we can talk about romance books.”

What about the grandparents? Can we meet them?

I want to meet Al! He sounds like a fun guy!

Lily and I exchange raised brows at these suggestions.

One more comment comes in from @GrammyLam: I’m ready to meet my fans! Let’s do it!

“Hi, Ma! That’s my dear mother, everyone,” Lily states with wide eyes. “These are some amazing ideas, guys! I’ll be sure to keep them in mind.”

“Thanks for joining us today!” I chime in, ready to save the day. My dear sweet wife, the love of my life, is likely regretting her decision to invite everyone to our live video today. But I’m ready to show her my gratitude and appreciation. “Have a great evening! Bye!”

“Bye!” Lily waves at the camera before she ends the video. She faces me, then cringes. “Oh boy, what have I done? Do you think my mother will want to join me for every video in the future?”

“Maybe the key is to teach her how to start her own account. She’d probably enjoy having the spotlight to herself even more.”

“That is a brilliant idea! Your brain is becoming more and more attractive the longer I know you.”

“That’s a good thing because, God willing, I’d like to wow you with my brain for a very, very long time.” I wrap my arm around Lily and pull her close. “Thank you for my surprise. I’m excited to be starting our own little bagel shop. ”

She snuggles into my side with a contented sigh. “I’m so excited, too. And to think I might have missed all of this if we hadn’t gotten married. Thank you for being my marriage of convenience wedding date.”

“You mean marriage of inconvenience wedding date.”

“Actually, I see it as more of a convenient inconvenience. We may have done things a little out of order, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. You were always meant to be my happily ever after, Hunter, conveniently or inconveniently.”

“And you, mine.” I kiss the top of her head. “Now, how are we going to explain our love story to our kids in the future? Do we mention the part about Mr. PowerPoint?”

Lily groans. “Nooo. Dates and presentations are two words that should never be in the same sentence. But we will definitely talk about the proper way to hang toilet paper. Deal?”

The sparkle in her eyes is something I’ll never get tired of seeing. I draw her close to me and murmur a single word as our lips meet: “Deal.”