

# MICKEY'S BIG WEEKEND

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## DISCLAIMERS:

This short romantic dramedy belongs in the Uber category. All characters are created by me though they may remind you of someone.

This story depicts a loving relationship between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top right corner of your screen right away.

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## NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

**Written:** July 2nd - 7th, 2014.

**Wendy Arthur** - once more, thank you for your help \*Flower\*

As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

**Description:** The time has come for Mickey Delany to suit up for her biggest gig yet as a personal assistant to the celebs: the recording star Veronica Masters has asked the boi-ish gal with the take-no-crap-from-nobody attitude to come work for her at a special event at the star's mansion. There, Mickey will encounter stars and starlets, egos and short tempers, sensual jazz, plenty of champagne, and perhaps a surprise or two that could turn it into a big weekend for all involved...

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## MICKEY'S BIG WEEKEND

In the hallway outside the apartment Mickey Delany called home, the graffiti, the busted, blinking strip light and the moth-eaten carpet were in their usual, rundown state, whispering to anyone visiting that this was but one step up from poverty row.

On the other side of the door with the three locks and the two sturdy safety chains, the sounds of someone showering filled the small but somewhat cozy apartment. Consisting of a living room without a view, an alcove doubling as the bedroom, a kitchen that could almost fit inside someone else's broom closet and a bathroom that was even smaller, the apartment wasn't a place to live, but simply a place to exist.

The twenty-four year old Mickey Delany turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. With her green eyes closed, she grabbed the bath towel and rubbed down her body that turned increasingly pink from the close attention of the cheap, coarse towel.

Once she was dry, she opened the small medicine cabinet above the wash basin and took out the various utensils she would need - her trusty razor, the shaving foam, the Nivea skin lotion and the new tube of extra-strength hair gel. As she closed the cabinet, the mirror that had turned into a cobweb of cracks some months previously when she had closed it a bit too rudely seemed to mock her, but she snorted and prepared the razor.

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Exuding plenty of DeLoissy's *Velvet Charisma Noir* deodorant and carrying plenty of gel in her recently shortened golden fleece - to make it stand up at the front in a classy yet evocative fashion - Mickey stepped into her bedroom wearing purple shorts and a white, short-sleeved undershirt. She was squeaky clean all over and silky smooth where it mattered.

On her way to the bedroom, she went past the old-fashioned plastic phone with an extra-long cord that was hanging on the wall next to a message board covered by the usual stuff: a brochure from her local pizza parlor, a list of phone numbers to her old co-workers at Duffy's Dipper - the whiskey joint where she had worked before - and several photocopies of casting calls from various movie projects that she hoped would bring her better luck than the countless ones that were already filling her trash can.

At the bottom of the message board, she had a print-out of a screencap she had made of the highlight of her career so far, the only scene she had ever filmed where she actually spoke lines of dialogue to the camera. Unfortunately, *Tentacles: Terrors From Below* hadn't found much of an audience, even on DVD.

She moved up to stand at the side of her bed and put her hands on her hips while she looked at the dark gray dresser bag with the fancy clothes sent to her at Lady Blu's insistence.

The three weeks that had just gone by were merely a blur to Mickey. Since the famed entertainer Veronica Masterson - better known as Lady Blu - had offered her a steady job as her personal assistant following the unexpected success of the Valentine's Day event at the West Coast Broadcasting Corporation's studio, she had quit her job at Duffy's Dipper, got a haircut, bought nicer clothes with the last of her savings, and last but not least, had even turned down an offer to play a supporting part in a non-union grade-Z horror movie.

Chuckling over the insanity of her world, Mickey smoothed down her gelled hair and leaned down to unzip the dresser bag that had been delivered by a courier. She grunted as she pulled out a pantsuit in a feminine cut with wide pantlegs, a narrow waist, a broad chest, and over-designed lapels on the v-neck shirt-like blouse.

"Okay..." she said, looking down at the high-quality fabric, "I guess she took me for a doll though I wore jeans and a vest at the event... okay."

Putting the undoubtedly expensive clothes down carefully, she rubbed her chin and stared at her meager closet on the other side of the bed. Before she could walk around the bed to find more suitable clothes, her telephone started ringing.

She was at the old-fashioned plastic phone in two heartbeats, dreading it was Veronica Masterson calling to nix the deal. Before she picked it up, she mouthed a silent prayer.

Scrunching up her face, she pinned down the receiver between her cheek and her shoulder and drew a deep breath. "It's Mickey D. Talk to me."

"*Hey, girl! Are ya nervous yet?*" Allie Hudson said at the other end of the line. At twenty-seven, the dark-skinned African American had evolved into the mother figure of their small group of freelance personal assistants. Though Allie welcomed her position as the natural leader, she had a mischievous streak that only those closest to her knew about - like Mickey, who had spent many an evening drinking, laughing and trading tips with her.

"Oh, hey, Allie! Thanks for calling," Mickey said and lit up in a smile. Instead of pinning down the receiver, she held it regularly and crossed back to the bed so she could sit down on the corner with her legs on either side of the post. "Yeah, yeah... a little bit nervous, yeah. Are the rest of you guys working tonight?"

"*Yes, Emanuela and I are both here downtown, at the We Love The Seventies Show presented by Dodge.*"

"You've practiced saying that, haven't you?" Mickey said with a chuckle as she reached down to take care of a persistent tickle on her right calf. "Have you had the draw yet?"

"*We have, and I won. Emanuela lost, she drew the short straw first thing.*"

"Awww, poor her. Who did she get?"

"*Ah, Rolling Thunder... an old rock'n'roll group famous for their backstage excesses.*"

"Should be good for tips, but she better watch her behind," Mickey said with a snicker.

"*Yeah. Girl, you're gonna meet the high and mighty tonight, you better reach into your bag of excitement 'cos you sound kinda down. Don't forget to eat something.*"

"I got leftover pizza that I'm gonna nuke in a while. Naw, it's just... well..." Mickey said and craned her neck to look at the fancy clothes behind her. "Well, it's just... it'll be fun to see Miss Masterson again, but I don't know about the rest of the people there. You know?"

"*I'll bet you've worked for most of them before, Mickey.*"

Mickey chuckled dryly and briefly closed her eyes to think back to some of the odd things she had experienced in the various dressing rooms around town - not to mention some of the odd people who had been there with her. "Mmmm... exactly."

"*Yeah, huh?*" Allie said and mirrored Mickey's dry chuckle at the other end of the line. "*Anyhow, I can't talk for too much longer. Uh... remember what we touched upon the other day...?*"

"Yeah, I'll put in a good word for you and Emanuela whenever I can, Allie, don't you worry. I have a couple of your business cards with me," Mickey said and got up from the bed. "Hey, this was a complete fluke. If you had lost the draw that night, you would have been Miss Masterson's personal assistant at the WCBC event."

*"That wasn't a fluke, Mickey, that was fate," Allie said with a laugh. "Aw, gotta go, the runner's pulling out his hair and he doesn't have much up there to begin with."*

"Have a great evening, Allie. Don't kill anyone and break a leg."

*"Thanks, girl. You too! Both of 'em!"*

"Gee, thanks," Mickey said and put the plastic receiver back on the hook. Once the phone had been taken care of, she walked back around the bed and stared at the fancy clothes that were still splayed out across her bedspread.

With a determined look on her face, she crossed over to her closet and opened the creaky door. Though she had to shuffle past her yellow down vest and several pairs of jeans, it didn't take her long to find the items she was looking for: a pair of gun metal gray pants with a matching blazer jacket, a white button-down shirt, and a narrow tie with a diagonal pattern that alternated between steel gray and sandy yellow - the latter of which matched her hair perfectly.

A grin spread over her features as she opened the shirt's top button and slipped it off the hanger. "Much better... aw, I'm gonna knock Lady Blu flat. Not that it'll matter how I look 'cos her husband's gonna be there... but I'm gonna knock her flat," she said with a cheeky grin.

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Wearing black shades to combat the strong rays of the evening sun, and chewing on a wad of cherry-flavored gum to combat the strong aftereffects of the onions and the cheese on the nuked pizza, Mickey drove sensibly across town to get to the gated community in the fancy neighborhood south of the hustle and bustle of the Big City.

Now and then, a creak she didn't appreciate rose from the exhaust - or the suspension, or both - of her old, decrepit Toyota Corolla, and she hoped the eighteen-year old vehicle wouldn't roll over and die before she had received her first paycheck with Lady Blu's signature on it.

The street she was looking for wasn't hard to find, but the sheer amount of security personnel present at the gate made her chew even harder on her gum. Large men in black suits were everywhere at the fence and offered a strong hint that she was about to step into a world inhabited by women who were balloon-chested and botoxed up the yin-yang, and men who had square shoulders, chiseled jaws and fashionable three-day stubble. Nothing new there.

Mickey's answer was to turn the wad of gum over and chew on it some more to get the last of the cherry flavor out of it before it grew stale.

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When it was Mickey's turn at the gate, a gruff security guard with the same hands and collar size as King Kong leaned in and tapped a fat knuckle on the window to make her open it.

"Here ya go, Sir," Mickey said and handed the guard her credentials that offered clear details as to her business at the Masterson mansion. She pushed her shades up her forehead and tried to be on her best behavior in case the bulge in the man's suit under his arm turned out to be something other than his wallet.

The security guard checked Mickey's credentials twice while he inspected the Corolla. The old vehicle seemed to be something of a stumbling block to the large man because he took a deliberate step back to stare at the rusty fender, the long scratch down the driver's side door and the filthy steel wheels. "Very well, Miss Delany," he eventually said as he stuck the credentials back through the opened window. "You may proceed. Park at the servants' garage. It's off to the right."

"Off to the right. Yes Sir, Admiral, Sir," Mickey said and drove past the gate. She went fifty yards up a gravelly driveway before turning sharp right instead of following the path the rest of the way up to the impressive mansion that was sitting pretty at the top like a cherry on a Sundae.

The path leading to the servants' garage was predictably less impressive and was nothing but a regular, paved road that led to an equally regular, one-storey building with seven parking bays. All seven doors were down indicating the bays were occupied, so Mickey drove over to the side of the small courtyard and killed the engine.

Before she got out, she glanced around and spotted a group of women standing at the garages smoking cigarettes. They soon noticed her and stared back, but when she didn't appear to be someone sent to keep track of them, they lost interest in the old Corolla and resumed talking.

With a grimace, Mickey tore off a piece of tissue from a box she had in her glove compartment and buried the wad of gum in it. She quickly tested her breath to smell if the onions had been vanquished. They hadn't fully, but it would have to do. She glanced up in the rear view mirror and found a gelled hair or two that needed to be smoothed down.

Since she had stopped pulling the graveyard shifts at Duffy's Dipper, her complexion had become much healthier and her eyes had lost the red hue that had plagued her for years. In short, she looked far more human, and - in her own opinion - a real catch for those so inclined.

"Not that anyone here would ever look at me twice," she mumbled as she unbuckled and took the ignition key.

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On her way along a path that led to the mansion's rear entrance, her eye caught three stretch limousines - two black and a charcoal gray - parked in front of a two-story garage building across from the main gravelly driveway. Behind the cars that had clearly been parked there to impress the esteemed guests, the upper story appeared to be apartments, probably for the drivers.

"Sheesh," Mickey said, chuckling over the night-and-day difference to her own, meager world.

The white mansion itself was merely the main building of a ranch-like palace spread out into half a dozen connected houses of varying size. Design features from the park in front of the mansion were mirrored in the details in the inner courtyard that was framed by the smaller buildings.

A ten-step sweeping staircase went down from the rear of the mansion and onto a plateau on which Mickey could easily picture Veronica and her husband, a big shot Hollywood actor, sitting on lazy Sunday mornings sipping their Lattés and reading the Wall Street Journal - or the Entertainment Weekly, depending.

Another sweeping staircase lined by grand vases went down to a swimming pool of Olympic proportions. Presently vacant and tended to by several groundsman to make it ready for the big event, the rich blue water provided a stark contrast to the burnt orange of the flagstones at ground level, the shiny aluminum ladders descending into the water in three locations along the sides of the pool, and the white circular tables and deck chairs that were placed seemingly at random along the edges.

The mere look of the pool promised plenty of excitement and Mickey licked her lips at the prospect of watching the bathing beauties that she hoped would show up. *'After all, what's a Hollywood party without a few frivolous starlets?'* she thought, pausing at the sight of the pool.

A pair of wide double doors opened at the rear entrance to the mansion, allowing access to the hallowed interior. With a final grin, Mickey drew herself away from the deep blue pool and climbed the sweeping staircase.

As she reached the top, she caught a glimpse of her new employer walking around in a bathrobe and with her dark hair in a bun. Veronica Masterson spoke to two assistants, a heavily pregnant woman in her late twenties and a cool, sophisticated Latina in a designer outfit. As always, the five foot eleven Lady Blu possessed the 'it'-factor in spades, even free of makeup or the elaborate costumes she was famous for wearing at the staged or televised events she performed at.

Mickey could see she hadn't been spotted yet, so she stepped into the mansion's lobby and tried to gawk at the splendor without appearing to be doing so.

At the far side of the large, open room, a few sound technicians were working on a raised dais that had already been equipped with a drum set and an upright piano. Genuine Persian and Oriental rugs graced the dark brown parquet floor underneath two clusters of couches and armchairs held in avant-garde designs. Huge, colorful paintings and a large mirror adorned the white walls, and there was even a fireplace, though it seemed to be dormant. The mantelpiece was the proud home of three shiny awards, an Emmy and two Grammys.

Mickey grinned as she took it all in, but her smile faded when she remembered Veronica revealing to her that she was in a loveless marriage, and that she and her husband in effect lived separate lives while staying at the same house. Career choices - or more to the point, the risk of losing them - meant she remained at his side though she had first-hand proof her husband was fooling around with a starlet from his tv show.

*'Oh, I can't wait to meet Mr. Hollywood Big Actor Bulging Pants and give him a piece of my mind. He must be nuts not to appreciate what he has in Veronica,'* Mickey thought, shoving her fists down into her pockets.

"Mickey?" Veronica Masterson said, suddenly realizing the short guy in the sharp suit wasn't a guy at all. "Why, Mickey Delany, it is you!" the star said and rushed forward with her arms stretched out ahead of her.

Grinning, Mickey allowed herself to be pulled into a strong hug by the sculpted woman. "Yeah, yeah, it's me, Miss Masterson. I told you I'd be here," she said into the bathrobe, enjoying the close proximity of the warm woman.

"You had me worried. I was looking for something completely different. Speaking of which... uh..." Veronica said and moved back an arm's length while she looked long and hard at Mickey's sharp suit. "Tell me, what's that you're wearing? Didn't you get the package I sent you?"

"I did. I unpacked it, looked at it and decided against wearing it, Miss Masterson. I'm sorry, but it was too feminine for my tastes. This is more my style," Mickey said and took a respectful step back so she wouldn't intrude on the star's personal space.

Her comment drew a snooty snort from one of the two women who were following Veronica around. Mickey zoomed in on the thirty-something Latina whose designer dress was matched perfectly by her designer shoes and her designer spectacles. Unfortunately, those spectacles did a poor job of keeping back a look of barely hidden contempt. Mickey's silent green fire eventually persuaded the other woman to look away.

"You know, Mickey," Veronica said with a sly smile that she tried to conceal by holding her index finger across her lips, "you're right. This is far more your style... and dare I say you look fabulous. Fabulous and thoroughly intriguing."

Mickey's cheeks were tinted red by the praise, and she smoothed down a slight crease in her blazer to have something to do with her hands. "Gosh golly, Miss Masterson. Thank you. The pantsuit was really nice an' all, but..."

"Forget it, Mickey. We all need to find our own way, don't we?" Veronica said and lit up in a smile that transformed her face. "Now... we're running a little late with the preparations and we've got a lot of stuff to go through, so I hope you can walk and talk at the same time," the star said with a cheeky gleam in her eye.

"I've been able to do that since I was two and a half, Miss Masterson. Don't you worry 'bout me."

Veronica smiled and reached out to put a freshly manicured hand on Mickey's shoulder to lead her on towards the far side of the lobby. "Good. My two assistants here are Inez Villareal and Carla Fignole. You'll be working closely with Inez tonight. As you can see by Carla's baby bump, she shouldn't be exposed to too much glitz and glamour so she'll leave when the first guests arrive."

The baby bump in question appeared to be no more than a month away from popping, and the reddish complexion on Carla's face proved she was more than ready for that to happen. "Hello, Miss Fignole, I'm Mickey Delany. You certainly look like you could need to take a load off," Mickey said and put out her hand.

"It's Mrs., actually. Yeah, I can't wait," Carla said with a smile.

"I'll bet," Mickey said and turned to Inez with her hand ahead of her. "Hi, I'm Mickey."

The other woman initially gave Mickey a frosty stare but remembered her manners and extended her hand. "Hello, Miss Delany. I'm Inez Villareal and I'll be your supervisor tonight," she said while shaking Mickey's hand with a cool, sophisticated touch that was a good match to her cool, sophisticated looks.

"Supervisor? Naw, I'm working for Miss Masterson," Mickey said with conviction.

Inez's dark brown eyes narrowed, but before she and Mickey could come to verbal blows, Veronica stepped in between them and put her hand on Mickey's shoulder. "Come, let's go to the master bedroom. It's time to organize my outfit for the evening," she said and pointed at a closed door.

"Certainly, Miss Masterson," Inez said and led the way to be the furthest from Mickey she could be.

Before the quartet of women could reach the door to the bedroom, a silky smooth male voice called out for them. "Sweetheart, there you are," the man said as he came down a short flight of stairs from the other side of the lobby, still putting on his tuxedo jacket.

In his late forties, the man was elegant and suave with just a touch of Mediterranean huskiness to his face. He was the owner of a neatly-kept hairdo and plucked eyebrows, and his ice blue eyes sat well around his nose. In short, he presented a striking figure of rugged handsomeness that melted plenty of hearts each time he graced the small screen as the major star of the long-running medical drama *St. Aloysius*.

*'So that's how Brent Salinger looks in real life,'* Mickey thought as she studied the star's manly looks. *'I should have known he would be shorter than he appears on the teevee... a lot shorter. He's gotta be standing on a box or something...'*

"Sweetheart, I need a word before you change," Brent said and leaned in to kiss Veronica's cheeks. "I've just had a phone call from one of our producers. There's an important man coming tonight and—"

Only then did Brent Salinger realize a new face had joined the team of personal assistants. As he turned to Mickey, his lips parted and formed the smile that had put him in the top five of the World's Sexiest Actor list three years running. "Hello there, Miss," he said in a velvety voice as he put out his hand. "I'm Brent Salinger. That's an unusual style you're wearing. It looks good on you, but it's definitely unusual."

"Not for me, Mr. Salinger. Hello, I'm Mickey Delany," Mickey said and shook the actor's hand. "Your charming wife has told me so many things about you," she added, throwing the man a wink to keep him guessing.

"Oh... right," Brent said and offered his wife a brief leer. "Like I said, sweetheart, I need a word."

Veronica screwed a smile on her face and reached out to touch Brent's elbow. "Please make it a short one, darling... we're in a real hurry. Inez, please go ahead and prepare the gown. All right?"

"Certainly, Miss Masterson," Inez said with a cool, sophisticated smile that faded when she pointed out the way to the bedroom for Mickey.

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It only took Mickey two seconds to decide that Veronica Masterson couldn't be sleeping in the room as she took in the sight of the covered king-size bed, the white, plush carpet and the gray net curtains covering the large windows. "No way this is Miss Masterson's bedroom... or anyone's bedroom for that matter. It's way too cold and impersonal."

"It isn't," Inez said with the warmth of an ice cube. "She uses this bedroom because it has a walk-in closet well suited for events such as this one. Miss Masterson spends her own time in a different part of the ranch."

"Oh, the ranch," Mickey said and trailed her finger down the exquisite bedspread, thinking about her own flea-bitten rag back home.

"Miss Delany, if I may be so bold," Inez said and stepped closer to Mickey though she never relaxed her arms that were crossed over her chest, "I cannot fathom what Miss Masterson sees in you, but you need to understand I'm the head personal assistant here. Frankly, if this was my decision, you'd already be on your way home. You clearly don't--"

"Do you always talk this much?" Mickey said, glancing over her shoulder.

The flippancy of the reply stopped Inez dead and she lost some of her momentum. Her eyes darted back and forth for a few seconds before she regained what she had lost and stepped closer to Mickey. "I beg your pardon?" she said in a lower register.

"Oh, you have it, don't you worry 'bout that. You see, Miss Villareal, I've graduated from the school of Hard Knocks, harder than you can ever imagine. I'm afraid you don't scare me much. Besides, my signature is right next to Miss Masterson's on the dotted line. All in all, this job is mine, regardless of how much your panties are pinching you."

It was easy to see by the narrow, bloodless lines that used to be lips in Inez's face that she was insulted, yet badly stumped for a reply. Instead of attempting anything, she let out an impressive huff and spun around on her heel to put as much distance as she could between herself and the other woman.

The catfight was interrupted by the door opening and Veronica stepping inside. She glanced around at the combatants before closing the door behind her and slipping out of her bathrobe.

Mickey's eyes traveled across the sculpted woman's salmon-colored lingerie and her dips, curves and planes, but she remained fully professional and concentrated on the task she was sure to get.

"Inez, get the gown, please," Veronica said with a smile.

"Yes, Miss Masterson," Inez said and stomped into the large walk-in closet.

When they were alone, Veronica cocked her head and shot Mickey a puzzled glance. "Is something going on between you and Inez that I should know about?"

"Oh no, Miss Masterson. Inez was just marking her territory, but she happened to squirt into the wind and got stained," Mickey said with a grin.

"Oh... I see. Now, when she returns with the gown, I need you to be honest, Mickey. I remember from our first encounter that your honesty is scathingly honest, indeed."

Mickey chuckled and stepped closer to the semi-bare woman. "You have my word, Miss Masterson. I'm not sure Inez will appreciate that, though."

"Ah, this is what I hired you for. Just fire away. I'll deal with the fallout."

Right on cue, Inez Villareal walked into the master bedroom with a dress bag over her arm. She quickly put it down on the bed and unzipped it. Once the delicate fabric was in the clear, she spread it out onto the bed and smoothed it down with her hand.

The gown turned out to be a straight cut, knee-length dress with bare shoulders and a plunging front. It was mainly held in chocolate brown, but it had caramel highlights around the hem and the cuffs. A wrinkled band circled the chest with a crepe rose in contrast colors sown onto the center.

Mickey took one look and promptly buried her face in her hands. "Yikes," she said between her fingers. "Okay... is this a 1920s retro party? Are you going to dance the Charleston on the tables?"

Inez drew a deep breath to fire off a broadside, but Veronica put a calming hand on the irate woman's shoulder before she could let go.

"What makes you say that, Mickey?" Veronica said, cocking her head.

"I'm sorry, Miss Masterson, but that dress blows."

"Blows?! I chose that dre—" Inez squeaked, but Veronica squeezed the assistant's shoulder harder.

Mickey intentionally ignored the squeak and walked over to the dress that she took between her experienced fingers. "Don't wear a straight cut when you have such fabulous curves! Straight cut is for women with snake hips like me. And the color... gosh golly almighty, you'll look like a six foot candy bar!"

"Candy b—" Inez cried, but was once again given the cold shoulder.

Continuing unperturbed, Mickey took the crepe rose and gave it a little whack. "With a gift wrapping!"

Inez raised her designer spectacles and pinched the bridge of her nose hard. When the apparent headache continued, she pinched it again for good measure. "Miss Delany, you're getting on my last nerve..."

"Sorry," Mickey said with a shrug before she turned back to Veronica. "Miss Masterson, may I speak my mind?"

"But of course, Mickey... I thought you were doing that already," Veronica said and once again put an index finger across her lips to hide the smirk that had formed.

"Yeah, but this is different," Mickey said and sized up the tall, statuesque woman who was standing in her underwear. "Okay. Crushed velvet. Fire engine red crushed velvet. Ankle length. Multi-layered. Hourglass waist. Bare shoulders, modest cleavage. Elbow-length gloves, of course. Mmmm. Soft, bronzed makeup to accentuate your eyebrows and your hair. Some kind of pendant on a gold chain that can reflect the light. Perhaps a black amethyst or a blood red ruby. Yep, that should do the trick."

After her speech had been delivered, Mickey crossed her arms over her chest and shot Inez Villareal a cheeky grin in a style reminiscent of someone saying *'Match that if you can!'*

Inez couldn't and settled for grumbling a few unintelligible words.

Veronica wasn't as tongue-tied and nodded with a rising degree of excitement on her expressive face. "Good idea, Mickey. Inez, find me a gown that matches your new colleague's description."

At first, Inez simply stared at Veronica but soon relented and snatched the chocolate brown dress. With a grunt, she went inside the walk-in closet to search for a gown with the wanted specifications.

Finally alone, Veronica cocked her head again and shot Mickey a curious glance. "On another, though related, matter... I must say, a suit, shirt and tie looks sensational on you, Mickey. You have the right stance in your shoulders to wear a suit. Most women don't."

"I'm not most women."

"I'm beginning to understand that," Veronica said and sat down on the edge of the king-sized bed. "I must admit the signals I'm picking up from you are mixed. I think I'm responding to your cockiness and your clothes... things like that have always been favorites of mine. But of course, you know..."

"Like most farm girls from Idaho, you're straighter than the Santa Monica pier," Mickey said with a grin.

Veronica quickly looked down and fiddled with her fingers before she once again locked eyes with her new assistant. "If you're not most women, maybe I'm not most farm girls from Idaho..."

That confession drew a raised eyebrow from Mickey, but before she could inquire about the deeper meaning of the surprising comment, Inez came back into the master bedroom with a red gown in her arms. The moment broken, Mickey stored the new information for later and concentrated on the second dress.

"Miss Delany here will probably reject it," Inez said and put the red gown onto the bed, "but this is the closest we have to the kind of dress she described. This is crimson, single-layer, pleated lower hem, knee-length, mono-strap over the right shoulder, hourglass waist..."

"Oh, that is a beautiful dress," Veronica said, getting up from her comfortable position at the edge of the bed. "Love the color. This is it. Mickey, do you have any objections?"

"None, Miss Masterson."

"Excellent. All right, let's get to it. The first guests will be here soon," Veronica said and reached for the blood red fabric.

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While Mickey and Inez helped Veronica slip into the red dress, the star's surprising comment kept churning on in Mickey's mind. Each time she held up a section of the fabric and thus made fleeting contact with the exquisite body before her, she couldn't help but think what it all meant. *'Am I just going to be an experiment for a bi-curious straight gal, or... or is there more to Veronica's comment than meets the, uh... ear?'*

When the concealed zipper at the back was finally pulled up and the evening gown was in place and looking very fine indeed, Veronica moved over to a life-sized mirror at the other side of the bedroom and checked herself out from all angles, oooh-ing at the way the dress clung to her without being vulgar or cheap.

Mickey observed the star's many curves and came to the conclusion that, *'Gosh golly, experiment or not... even if it would only last a week, I'd have enough to get myself through a whole winter's worth of lonely nights afterwards. I think I'll roll with it and see what happens... I mean, what's the worst that could happen? Okay, rejection, but that doesn't seem to be on the cards.'*

The star's posing made the temperature creep upwards in the bedroom, and Mickey took off her blazer and flung it over her shoulder. Holding it by her index finger, she grinned crookedly at Veronica. Her crooked grin turned into a toothy grimace when the star put her hand on her hip, cocked her head and flashed Mickey a sizzling smile.

*'Okay,'* Mickey breathed inwardly, *'who is that doll and what did she do to the Ice Bitch who nearly took my head off back at the Valentine's Day special for standing up to her? Gosh golly almighty, it got hot in here... she better not smile at me like that too often or I'll catch fire... shoot, I think she may be tipsy! Or high, though she doesn't- Goll-ly, she just shot me another smile,'* Mickey thought, changing position to reduce the pressure on her sensitive parts.

The moment was broken before it could become even more embarrassing than it already was when one of the other staffers knocked on the door and stuck her head inside. "Miss Masterson," the woman said as she looked at the three people in the bedroom, "the first guests are arriving."

"Thank you, Simona," Veronica said and quickly fluffed her dark locks to make them fall just right. "Inez and Mickey, please come with me. Now the fun begins."

"And a truckload of fun I'm sure it'll be," Mickey said and put her blazer back on to have something to do with her hands.

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Outside the master bedroom, the staffers had withdrawn from the lobby after preparing it for the wave of Very Important People that were soon to enter the lavish mansion. Veronica Masterson walked around scanning everything with a critical eye, checking all the little things that invariably popped up here and there in such a situation.

Satisfied, she met with her husband at the center of the room and strode arm in arm towards the double doors like a royal couple.

"Oh," Inez breathed, clapping her hands to her bosom. "Aren't they beautiful together? Goodness me, they are simply the most perfect people I know."

Mickey snorted and tore her eyes away from Veronica's gently wiggling rear. "May I suggest you get out more? I've heard stories of Brent's--"

"That's Mr. Salinger to you, Miss Delany!" Inez said, hissing so hard on the double-S in 'miss' that it sounded like she had grown a forked tongue.

Mickey assumed a perfectly bashful expression while she put her hands on her cheeks and performed a slight shimmy to show that she was oh-so embarrassed over her gaffe. "Mr. Salinger, pardon me. Well, let's just say that I've heard stories about him that make him out to be less than perfect."

Inez shot Mickey a cold glare that nearly made her designer spectacles crack. "He's a popular actor, Miss Delany... of course the gutter press will fabricate lies about him."

"Of course," Mickey said, not about to spill that she knew about Brent Salinger's adultery directly from Veronica. "Oh, there's the first limo now. I wonder who it'll be."

"Famous Hollywood actor Aaron Kaye and wife," Inez said surly.

"Oh! You have it memorized? Wow, good for you," Mickey said and stepped forward without waiting for a reply. She was quickly at Veronica's side but kept in the background while the star greeted her first guests.

In the years Mickey had worked as a personal assistant to the stars at various events, she had learned that fame was merely a thin layer of veneer. The core attitude would remain no matter how famous the person would become, and thus good people would be good stars, jokers would be unpredictable stars, and obnoxious people would turn into the stars who would do all the things mothers around the world warned their little ones about.

The actor - and wife - who strode through the double doors appeared to fall into the third category, Mickey could see that with half a glance. Aaron Kaye had wild hair, black shades, a two-day stubble and a suit that was designed to appear messy and crumpled. His claim to fame was being the star and co-creator of a pair of popular movies that followed a brainless stoner's escapades through the wild nightlife of Los Angeles.

Brent Salinger greeted Aaron by pulling him into a guy-hug with plenty of backslapping. Behind Aaron, his wife - wearing the ubiquitous skimpy black dress - was a cute little thing who looked so bored she had a vacant stare in her eyes.

Mickey wasn't familiar with her, but she offered her a polite smile that failed to draw any kind of response. She sighed, knowing it would be a long evening in the company of the rich and shameless.

Inez tiptoed up to Mickey's side and leaned in towards her left ear. "Next up is Natasha Rivers and husband."

Nodding, Mickey screwed a smile on her face to greet the next couple. She cast a glance out of the corner of her eye and noticed Veronica wearing a very similar smile - though in the star's case, it seemed to hide a mask of nervousness that had come from being in the spotlight.

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The Lloyd Baker Trio provided the jazzy soundtrack for the power-mingling that took place later on in the evening. Everywhere Mickey looked, important or influential women and men were chatting about this, that and the other while cocktail waitresses in black jackets and short, white skirts waltzed around the many people carrying trays laden with champagne flutes and finger snacks.

Deals were suggested, hammered out, finalized or possibly even broken in the murmur of voices that rolled through the mansion's lobby. Now and then, a laugh rose from a guest after a droll or risqué joke, and now and then, a coked-up screech rose to hysterical levels for no good reason at all other than it probably felt like the right thing to do at the time.

Veronica strolled around the crowd of VIPs with a look on her face that told a story of a woman firmly on top of her game. Not arrogant or self-important, but sublimely confident in her worth and her skills as the hostess. The flute of champagne she carried around with her was emptied, replaced by a full one, emptied again, and replaced again. The only crack in her facade was the harried expression in her eyes that she thought no one else could identify.

Mickey could, however, and she followed Veronica's stare over to Brent who was chatting up an actress from a rival tv show, Rita Domenica. The female star's caramel-colored dress was hardly there at all, and her bronzed cleavage didn't end until four inches below her navel. While Mickey watched the two interact, Rita threw her head to make her long, black locks fall down her other shoulder, smiled at Brent and moved her lips seductively.

A tide of annoyance rose inside Mickey, and if Veronica hadn't changed direction to walk over to one of the armchairs, Rita Domenica would have received a piece of Mickey's mind whether she wanted it or not. Grumbling, she followed Veronica over to the armchairs and slipped into position behind the backrest.

"You noticed, didn't you?" Veronica said quietly out of the corner of her mouth as she sat down and crossed her endless legs. She moved her crimson dress up to cover her knee but reconsidered and let her smooth leg and perfectly shaped calf dangle in full view. "With Brent, I mean."

Mickey glanced at the two people who were still talking. Rita laughed at something Brent had said and put her long, slender fingers on his manly chest to underline his point and her good mood. "Oh I noticed, all right, Miss Masterson. What a dick."

"My husband or the woman?"

"Both."

"You're too right, as always. Oh, Mickey... would you mind getting me a new glass of champagne? I must have spilled this one somewhere. It's empty but I can't remember drinking it."

Mickey grunted and looked at the empty flute that Veronica held up. "Certainly, Miss Masterson... but I think I'd slow down if I were you."

"Is Brent still talking to—"

"Yep."

"Then I need a new glass of champagne, Mickey," Veronica said without looking in her husband's direction.

A smile of understanding creased Mickey's lips as she took the flute and went on a quest to find a cocktail waitress. Upon her return with the next glass of champagne, she stopped dead in her tracks when she recognized the African-American star actor sitting next to Veronica. "Gosh golly almighty... that's Edison Cullen," she whispered to herself. "Oh... oh, I gotta slip him Allie's business card somehow. Shoot... think, Mickey, think..."

Mickey crossed the final part of the plush carpet and handed Veronica the new flute. "Here you go, Miss Masterson," she said, guiding Veronica's fingers to the stem of the glass.

"Thanks, Mickey. Do you know Edison?"

"No, I haven't had the pleasure."

"We were both in the William Brougham biopic I told you about... oh... I forgot the name of the darn thing..." Veronica said and squinted with her hazy eyes.

"William's Song," Edison and Mickey said as one.

"Right... right," Veronica said and took a sip of the champagne.

A grin graced Mickey's face, but it faded when she had a vision of an embarrassingly drunk Veronica staggering around her own mansion scaring her guests and creating a scene by belting out show tunes at the most inappropriate moments. It was her job as a personal assistant to stop that from happening, and she would make damn sure she did - provided it ever came to that, of course.

"I'm Mickey Delany, how do you do, Sir?" Mickey said while she extended her hand towards Veronica's guest.

The star actor rose from his chair and shook Mickey's hand. "Edison Cullen, Miss Delany. I'm just fine, thanks. How are you tonight?" he said in his trademark baritone.

In his late forties, Edison was an undeniable star whose talent had taken him from the Broadway stages to the Hollywood sound stages. It didn't hurt that he was a handsome fellow with distinguished features and a strong, charismatic presence. Known as a rock-solid performer, he had specialized in playing characters who could be counted on to save the day even though everything around him fell to pieces.

Mickey didn't know much about his personal life, except that he had an Academy Award for Best Actor on his mantelpiece for a political thriller, and if people called him 'Eddie,' they'd better be ready to be growled at.

"Fine, fine," Mickey said and relished the star's strong handshake which was a marked difference from the many so-called 'leaves of lettuce' she had been exposed to in her career. "Say, can I get you a drink, Sir?"

"Well, I was wondering if there was a Bourbon somewhere around here...? Straight, no water or ice."

"If there is, I'll find it. If there isn't, I'll buy one," Mickey said with the effortless smile she had perfected over her years as a P.A. "Miss Masterson?"

"Sure, go right ahead, Mickey. And while you're at it, perhaps you could find me another glass of champagne?" the star said with a casual wave.

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A few minutes later, Mickey came back with yet another flute of champagne for Veronica and a Bourbon Straight for Edison Cullen. The ubiquitous napkin around and underneath the glass was held in place by her pinkie, and she had taken the opportunity to slip Allie Hudson's business card in under the glass so Edison would be unable to miss it when he enjoyed his Bourbon.

When she reached the two armchairs, Edison and Veronica were both on their feet and kissing each other's cheeks, a clear sign they were ready to move onto other discussion partners.

Mickey moved swiftly and presented the drink to the actor. "Here you go, Sir. Bourbon Straight, no water, no ice. Remember, In Bourbon Veritas," she said as she handed the tall man the glass, holding the napkin in a way that he had to put his fingers underneath it, thus keeping the business card in place.

"Oh, I do believe it's In Vino Veritas, Miss Delany," Edison Cullen said with a rumbling laugh. "Much obliged. Veronica," he continued, bowing slightly to his hostess.

"Edison," Veronica said with a sly smile that grew wider as she tracked his manly form moving away from her. "Now, Mickey, about that champagne...?"

"Right here, Miss Masterson," Mickey said, handing the umpteenth flute of bubbly to the star.

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Mickey kept glancing over her shoulder to see if Edison discovered the card or not. He was talking to someone else and not paying attention to his drink, but when he took the final sip, he stared into the glass like he had spotted something that wasn't typically there.

While Veronica strolled on to speak with one of the musicians she was about to sing with, Mickey kept standing in one spot to stare at the star actor. Much to her delight, he studied the card a couple of times before flipping it over to read the back. Soon, he reached into his pocket and found his iPhone. He punched in a number, but Mickey was too far away to see if it was Allie's or simply a coincidence.

When the connection had been made, Edison spoke into the phone while looking at the card. He nodded a couple of times and spoke on. Still holding the iPhone to his ear, he glanced around and locked eyes with Mickey. He grinned at her and offered her a thumbs-up.

Inwardly, Mickey jumped up and down and performed a flashy cartwheel on the Persian rug. *'Yay! Allie Hudson, you owe me one of Mama Sophia's famed extra-cheese Capricciosas! This one's all yours, girl... I know you won't blow it!'*

In her excitement over the golden opportunity created for her friend, Mickey hadn't noticed that she had lost Veronica Masterson somewhere along the way. Spinning around, she nearly bumped into a pair of gold lamé-covered breasts that belonged to one of Veronica's colleagues in the entertainment industry. "Oops... I beg your pardon," Mickey said and navigated around the impressive pair.

Veronica had already moved up onto the small dais at the far end of the room and was adjusting the microphone stand to make it fit her superior height. When everything was in place, she nodded at the sound technician who turned on the microphone. "Hello and good evening, everybody," she said in a voice that was only partially marked by the quantum of champagne she'd consumed. "We got singers and actors and showbiz people of every kind here, so how about we got the show on the road? I promise I'll bre beef... uh... uh... be brief," she said, rolling her eyes at her slip of the tongue.

The crowd duly laughed, but Mickey got a nervous tic around the corner of her mouth. She was ready to jump onto the dais and rescue Veronica if need be.

"Okay, here we go," Veronica continued, signaling the Lloyd Baker Trio - three guys on upright piano, whiskers and a double-bass - to start the jazzy evergreen. Soon, the musicians played the intro to Nina Simone's *My Baby Just Cares For Me* and Veronica fell into her Lady Blu stage persona with the greatest of ease.

She breathed the words rather than sang them, and the way she closed her eyes and held the microphone tight while she laid her soul bare left the audience mesmerized.

During the performance, several of the onlookers - and not just the men - began to fan themselves with whatever they had at their disposal. Mickey wasn't one of them, but she reached up and loosened her tie without taking her eyes off Veronica's show for even a second.

Halfway through the song, Veronica opened her eyes and sang the rest in an even deeper register. She looked around at the crowd at her feet until she found the person she was singing to. When she had found her, a sly, sensual smile spread over her lips and she sent the woman with the heavily gelled hair a series of winks that left very little to the imagination.

Now Mickey did need to fan herself, but all she had was her tie. She knew it would look too ridiculous so she forced herself into ignoring the hot flash that exploded through her entire body from her scalp to her big toes. It wasn't easy - once it had traveled down the outside of her legs, it made a perfect rebound at her ankles and trickled up the inside of her thighs.

Smirking, Mickey shuffled around on the spot to take some of the pressure off, but the suggestive way Veronica continued to sing the evergreen negated all her attempts at remaining cool and sent a persistent wave of little goosebumps over areas that hadn't been stimulated for far too long.

When the show was finally over, Mickey had a wad of cotton in her head instead of a brain. She stared wide-eyed at the performer and only began to clap because everyone around her did. Somewhere at the back of her mind, it registered that trouble could ensue because Veronica had winked at her instead of Brent Salinger. Veronica's husband had to be a little miffed about his wife's blatant seduction of a stranger, but as always when hot blood was pumping, logic exited stage-left, and Mickey forgot about it as soon as it had entered her fuzzy mind.

Veronica stepped off the small dais and left the Lloyd Baker Trio to go on a quest to find a full glass of champagne. Behind her, the trio began to play a selection of jazz favorites, but despite their best effort, they had far less of an impact on the audience than Lady Blu had had, and everybody began to drift away.

At the back of the lobby, somebody opened the double glass doors that allowed access to the rear courtyard and the pool, and it didn't take long for people to shuffle out there to continue the party in the cozy light of the mood lamps that had been turned on ahead of time.

Almost as expected, it only took a couple of minutes before a pile of clothes ended up poolside and a loud splash proved that someone had found the swimming pool irresistible. Excited squeals and more splashes followed until someone was calling for beach balls and drinks with umbrellas.

Mickey leaned against the double doors and looked out onto the pool party. So far, only a couple of guys had entered the deep blue, but she had high hopes that one or two of the female guests would join them.

"Oh, there you are," Veronica said somewhere behind Mickey. When she turned around, the hot flash returned with a vengeance at the sight of Veronica's flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"Here I am, yes. Miss Masterson, do you always sing that old tune like that? I do believe a few of your listeners needed a dry pair of shorts afterwards."

Veronica snickered into her hand and leaned into Mickey's shoulder to give the shorter woman a little nudge. "I don't. But it felt like the right thing to do at the time. Did you see the look on Brent's face? I got him right back, the big... something."

"No, I was busy," Mickey said and began to chew on her cheek as Veronica's words filtered through her mind. '*Oh. Right. I should have known. She used me to bust his hump. Well, okay... yeah, that puts everything into perspective. Still... it was a sizzling performance,*' she thought and glanced sideways at the star's glowing presence. With the adrenaline leaving her system after the revelation, she reached up and tightened the knot on her tie.

"Come," Veronica suddenly said and pulled Mickey back into the lobby that had cleared out considerably. "With everybody outside, there's space for us to sit and talk... and get a new glass of champagne."

"Uh... okay. Very well, Miss Masterson," Mickey said and followed the star inside.

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A female singer in a black, spaghetti-strap dress had joined the Lloyd Baker Trio on the dais and was belting out one of Lady Blu's hits, *Love Is Like A Wheel Of Fortune*. The twenty-something singer whose skin tone was a sensual mix of Latin and Scandinavian coloring gave it her best, but her fairer voice couldn't hold a candle to Veronica's jazzier pipes.

To support her younger colleague, Veronica turned the armchair around and sat facing the singer to offset the fact that most of the other guests were ignoring the young woman's efforts. When the song finished, Veronica clapped enthusiastically and saluted the singer by raising her glass.

The singer smiled back before she sat down on a bar stool and dabbed her damp brow with a handkerchief. Around her, the trio began playing an instrumental to keep the music going though hardly anyone listened to them.

Veronica emptied her flute and put it on the tray of a cocktail waitress who happened to walk past at that very moment. "Mickey, have you seen my husband lately?" she said, looking around for not only Brent but a refill as well.

"I haven't, Miss Masterson," Mickey said and looked around the lobby just to be sure. "I haven't seen Inez Villareal either, for that matter."

The comment made Veronica laugh out loud while she leaned back in the armchair and crossed her legs. This time, the slit in the side of the pleated skirt revealed the entire length of a shapely thigh that she didn't try to cover up. "I know for a fact that Inez wouldn't dare try anything with Brent. She knows I'll kick her out on her hiney faster than she could spell her last name. I can't control Brent, but Inez knows she's fair game."

A laugh that bordered on the hysterical accompanied the chilling statement. Veronica seemed to recognize that she was on the wrong side of the fence because she sobered instantly and looked down at her hands that were clutched in her lap. She moved her leg down like she was suddenly embarrassed at showing that much skin.

Mickey grunted and pushed the other armchair over next to the star's. Sitting down, she reached over and put a warm hand on Veronica's elbow though she decided on playing it safe by keeping it on the outside of the crimson dress. "Hey, it's okay to be upset, Miss Masterson. I'll gladly listen if you want to talk about it."

The star looked at the tuxedo-clad men and the barely-dressed women who walked in from poolside and around the lobby. They were smiling, laughing, drinking champagne and behaving like they owned the place. One or two were visibly coked up, like an actress whose eyes were out on stalks, and others were getting tipsy on the combination of free champagne, finger food and the warm evening.

"I'd... I'd love to talk," Veronica said quietly and rose from the armchair, "but not here. In private. Okay? There's... there's a room we can use down this hallway. Humor me, Mickey... please."

"Oh, it'll be my pleasure, Miss Masterson," Mickey said and took a firm grip on the star's arm so she wouldn't trip. "Down there?" she continued, using her free hand to point down a hallway.

"Yeah. Third door on the right. It's a study."

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A scant minute later, Mickey closed the door to the room with her heel and helped Veronica over to a wicker chair where she sat down with a groan.

The study was held in a Far Eastern style with bamboo blinds, round, Indonesian carpets and expensive, high-quality wickerwork furniture. The walls carried colorful tapestries and artwork from the entire region, with the highlight being a woven rendering of a tiger on the prowl somewhere in a mountainous area of the Chinese mainland.

After making sure the door was closed so no one could eavesdrop, Mickey took off her blazer and threw it over the back of another wicker chair. She knelt down in front of Veronica and took the blurry star's hands in her own. "Miss Masterson, you—"

"Veronica. Call me Veronica."

"I'd rather not, Miss Masterson. I—"

A dark eyebrow curved upwards on the star's pale forehead. "My name is Veronica. I want you to call me Veronica," she said decisively.

Mickey smiled and patted the star's hand. "All right, Veronica. Anyway, I must be truthful and tell you ya look like dog poop. Either the champagne was spiked or you're ill... or something?"

"No, I..." Veronica said and shook her head slowly. She grimaced before she continued, a slow, embarrassed smirk that spread over her painted lips, out to her cheeks and even up to her nose. "I haven't eaten for a day and a half."

"Oh... gosh golly... all that champagne..."

"I needed the champagne," Veronica said with a tired wave. "I didn't eat because I knew I'd just upchuck everything, so I didn't bother. Remember I told you I always get really nervous before a gig?"

"Yeah?"

"It's the same for these functions. I'm in way, way over my head."

"No, but... I mean..." Mickey said and gestured at the crimson dress and the rest of the star's exterior. "I mean, you look so confident..."

"It's all bull. I'm a mess of quivering goo inside."

"But... why?"

Veronica groaned which prompted Mickey to move away in a hurry in case the nine flutes of champagne she had seen the star chug down came back to haunt her. The groan wasn't a precursor to vomiting, so Mickey moved back and took Veronica's hands again.

"Because I'm out of my league. I'm a farm girl from Idaho who doesn't know what the hell she's doing here."

"Miss Mast— I mean, Veronica, that's not true... you sing like a wet dream come true. You're a natural on a stage."

"Thank you... heh, at least I'm doing something right," Veronica said and offered Mickey a tired smile at the cheeky comment. "But at midnight... in an hour and a half... I'm... I'm going up on the dais to tell the world that my husband is a cheat and a liar. That he's screwing everything in a skirt... or out of a skirt."

"Awww shit," Mickey said and stared wide-eyed at the weak woman before her. She glanced around the nicely decorated room like she expected to find something that would help her, or at least explain the mess she had suddenly found herself in. "Well, okay... that's gonna draw some headlines. Are you prep—"

"I'll be kicked out in the cold. Nobody messes with Brent Salinger, nobody... certainly not his trophy wife," Veronica said with a grimace that proved she had thought every last sordid detail through. She squared her shoulders and tried to put on a brave face. "But it doesn't matter. That's where I came from. Nothing lasts forever... time for a change... a closed door is an opportunity for... something. On and on with all that bull. I don't want it to end, dammit! I spent years singing in seedy jazz clubs to get where I am now! But I don't want to suffer the humiliation of staying with him, either."

"But your records have sold a bazillion! Some of that money must be yours...?"

"Agents and multi-year contracts and kickbacks and— God, on and on. I have some money stowed away, but all of what you see here is Brent's."

"Jeez, this is a mess," Mickey mumbled while she rubbed her chin.

Veronica sighed deeply and reached down to caress Mickey's brow and cheek. "Where I come from, marriage is sacred. A lot of things are sacred. In this f- f- fuckin' shark tank, nothing is sacred. Everything here is 'what have you done for me lately,' friendships are broken at the drop of a hat, secrets are revealed to the gutter press for a few

thousand dollars. Compromising photos are shot with a telephoto lens and used for blackmail with no regard for the individual featuring in them."

"Wh- what? Back up a little... someone's got compromising photos of you?"

"Yes. It's so unfair... it should have been Brent who was caught on camera with one of his conquests, but he's always so discreet. I was topless at my own pool... I don't know what I was thinking. I noticed a helicopter in the area but I didn't think anything of it. A couple of days later, I checked my email and bam, there they were. Literally."

"Well, okay... pop starlets go to premieres all the time with sheer outfits. Topless isn't exactly the end of the world these days."

"For me it would be, Mickey!" Veronica said and smacked her hand down onto the armrest of the wicker chair. "My breasts are my own business, not anyone else's, and they certainly shouldn't be on the cover page of the damned *Stars Now!* magazine!"

Mickey nodded somberly, but suddenly looked up and locked eyes with the star. "Wait a minute... *Stars Now!* magazine? The photo shoot from the mansion...?"

"They blackmailed me into doing that. I didn't want to, but they threatened to flash my breasts all over the news stands if I didn't comply with their terms. They told me where and how to stand, told me what to wear, told me to swoon over my heartthrob of a husband though I knew he had an itch behind his fly for some half-undressed bimbo on the photo team."

"That blows! What a bunch of dicks!" Mickey growled and thumped her fist into the Indonesian carpet. "And all this time, I've been wanting to break into the industry... Jeez, I'm better off at Duffy's Dipper serving drinks and fending off drunken fools!"

"It's probably a more honest living, Mickey."

"Yeah, but... Jeez! Veronica, are... are you really going ahead with the big announcement at midnight?"

Veronica drew a deep breath and leaned her head back so her dark locks rested on the back of the wicker chair. She studied the ceiling for a while before she closed her eyes and breathed a "Yes."

"In that case," Mickey said and got up, "I better find some coffee or something for you. I know it's just a myth that it'll make you sober, but the caffeine will give you a much-needed kick up the rear."

Mickey made to move away, but Veronica held onto her arm. When she locked eyes with the star, she knew she had reached a crossroad. The look of sadness and longing in Veronica's blue orbs was so deep she nearly drowned in it, and she knew instinctively that a kiss would be the only thing that would comfort the hurting woman. A kiss wasn't in her job description, but she was flexible and certainly willing to go that extra mile to satisfy the needs of her VIP clients.

Smiling wistfully, Mickey leaned down towards Veronica's lips but kept her eyes open in case she had misread the star after all. As she had hoped, she hadn't.

When their lips brushed against each other for the first time, both experienced a surge of electricity they hadn't counted on, one that swept through them and left a warmth akin to a comfortable blanket in its wake. It made their hearts speed up with a pleasant pitter-patter, it made their stomachs perform identical flip-flops and it made their nerve ends stand on edge while they waited for the next step.

It came at once. The first, gentle brush became another, then a more insistent kiss where Mickey did in fact close her eyes to allocate all her energy to the senses that needed it the most.

The sweet contact ended all too soon, but they stayed close out of fear of breaking the spell. Looks were exchanged that told a story of surprise, of delight, of relief, of a certain amount of apprehension, even insecurity, but definitely of galloping hearts and coursing blood.

A deep blush spread over Veronica's cheeks and Mickey decided to give the other woman some breathing space so she wouldn't feel cornered by her proximity. "Hey," she whispered, caressing Veronica's dark eyebrows, "you're a good kisser, Miss Masterson."

"Thank you," Veronica said in a matching whisper. The blush deepened and was accompanied by a shy smile and a little tear that ran down from her right eye. She quickly dabbed her cheek so the salty tear wouldn't ruin her makeup. "I've never kissed a woman before. I've wanted to, but... I've never had the nerve. Until now."

"I'm glad to have been your first, Veronica. I hope I didn't disappoint," Mickey whispered, leaning down to kiss the star's forehead.

"You didn't. It was all I had ever dreamt of... so different from kissing a man. So much better... infinitely better..."

Mickey grinned cheekily and puffed out her chest. "Yeah, huh?"

"Yeah," Veronica said and poked Mickey in the gut out of sheer elation. With a squeal, she grabbed the shorter woman around the waist and pulled her down for a messy, unrestrained, crushing hug that didn't end before the chair they were in creaked like it was about to fall apart in a thousand pieces.

Getting up, Mickey smoothed down her hair while she sported a shit-eating grin that reached from ear to ear. "Gosh golly almighty, I knew the day would be fine when I woke up this morning... I just didn't know it would be this fine! Huh! Now sit tight while I get you some coffee. Okay?"

"Okay, Mickey," Veronica said and flaked out in the wicker chair. Sighing deeply, she closed her eyes and ran an index finger across her lips, over and over and over again.

Mickey nearly reneged on her offer of getting some coffee when she spotted the sensual gesture, but her sense of duty to her employer was stronger - if only just.

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Mickey and Veronica didn't come out of the study until a quarter past eleven. By then, the caffeine had given Veronica a kick like Mickey said it would, and the star looked much better.

In the lobby, the young, female jazz singer was busy interpreting Lady Blu's *Nights Between Satin Sheets*, and this time, she had the eyes of the guests upon her - partially because of the sensual song, and partially because she was writhing to the beat with her hands pressed to her stomach and elsewhere.

"I wish it wasn't necessary for her to do that to get some attention. She's a great talent, but before, nobody could be bothered to listen to her," Veronica said on their way past the singer.

"Well, when you sang *My Baby Just Cares For Me* before, you weren't exactly looking like a nun, either."

"No, but I never touched myself like that. I laid the groundwork but the rest was just your imagination running wild."

"Heh, heh... very true, that," Mickey said with a cheeky grin. "But to be honest, it does look kinda sexy," she continued, eyeing the singer's gyrations and roaming hand.

"Perhaps so, but the music should speak for itself," Veronica said and moved on towards the glass double doors. All of a sudden, she stopped dead and stared at a face that had popped up in the crowd. Her posture became rigid and she raised her hands to press them against her heart.

Mickey came to a halt as well and tried to peek around the taller woman. She needed to take a big step to the side to see better, and even then, she was only able to see tuxedos and dresses that were hardly there at all. "What's wrong, Veronica? Do you need to barf?"

"No..." Veronica breathed, staring at the crowd but only seeing one face. "How did she get in? That woman there... the brunette in the dark blue dress... do you see her? How did she get past the security?"

"Wait, I can't see a damn— oh... oh, yeah, I see her," Mickey said and zoomed in on the woman whose angry face proved she was there to stir up a category five tornado. "Who is she? A paparazzi or something?"

"No. Worse."

"Worse than a paparazzi? This I gotta see..."

"I caught her and Brent in the sack about six-seven months ago," Veronica said in a voice that didn't sound like hers at all. "Caught them red-handed. She's a two-bit walk-on actress from his show. I blew up and threw her out... I... oh!"

"What?!" Mickey said and hopped up on tip-toes to see better.

As the crowd parted, the woman came into full view - and 'full' was certainly the right word to use for her condition. She was pregnant, and heavily so.

"Holy sh—" Mickey said, but before she could complete the sentence, the pregnant woman stormed up onto the dais and pushed the writhing jazz singer away from the microphone.

"I'm pregnant with Brent Salinger's child!" the woman roared into the microphone, causing the speakers to clip and the sound technician to scramble for his buttons. "That's right! I'm pregn—"

The woman kept shouting, but the amplified sound disappeared right in the middle of her exclamation.

Veronica's chin quivered at the - perhaps not completely unexpected - revelation, but she turned around and signaled the sound technician that he should turn the microphone back on. He did so with a guffaw, and the woman's penetrating voice was once again amplified for everyone to hear.

"—with Brent's child and the son of a bitch won't even give me the time of day. Did everyone hear what I'm telling you? I'm pregnant with Brent Salinger's child!"

A wall of noise rose from the excited crowd who treated it as a big sporting event. The noise only grew louder when Brent himself came storming through one of the hallways, tucking his shirt into his pants while he did so. The usually so impeccable star's facial color was red bordering on purple, and his eyes grew wider and wider as he took it all in.

"All right, what the hell is going on here? Sonia? Sonia, what the hell are you doing?" he said to the woman, reaching for - and missing - the microphone.

"Welcome to the headlines, Daddy-O!" Sonia cried, showing the father of her child her pregnant belly.

A wave of Ooooooh's rose from the crowd who eagerly turned to Brent in the hope he'd do something equally outrageous.

"Get down from there, you crazy woman!" Brent hissed, once again reaching for the microphone. "I offered you five thousand dollars to get rid of it before you started showing but you said it wasn't enough!"

When the actor didn't even try to deny the baby could be his, another wave of Aaaaaah's rose and everyone turned to Veronica to see how she would react.

She reacted by growing white and becoming unstable on her legs. Listening to the things spewing from the two people, she clutched her hands in front of her bosom like her heart couldn't understand what was going on. Though she didn't speak, she took a staggering step forward to lean against the nearest armchair.

Mickey hurried in behind Veronica to support her before she fell. With a firm grip and a steady hand, she maneuvered the star down onto the chair and waved one of the cocktail waitresses over to them. "Get Miss Masterson some water... plenty of it. No, scratch that... do you have any São Sébastião mineral water?"

"O- of course... It's Miss Masterson's favo-"

"All right. Pour some into a tumbler and get back here on the double. A thick tumbler. Got it?"

"Y- yes, Miss," the young woman said and hurried away from the lobby.

"Good," Mickey said and took off her blazer so she could use it to fan Veronica's face that alternated between frozen white and flushed red. Now and then, she turned around and sent a bolt of green fire at Brent Salinger whose expression proved that he was angry at Sonia for blowing the lid off the affair rather than having it in the first place.

Up on the dais, Sonia grunted and took the microphone again. "Did everyone get my message? Brent Salinger is the father of my unborn child... took me by surprise 'cos I didn't think his four inches could do it."

A whole group of heads snapped around to stare at Brent, quickly followed by a wave of saucy Oooooooh's - one of which came from Mickey who grinned wickedly at the outrageous revelation. She wouldn't even try to hide that she was pleased to witness the deconstruction of the star who had treated Veronica so poorly.

Brent spluttered with barely contained anger. He put his hands on the back of his head in an attempt to cool down, but his body language proved it didn't really work. Seething over the unwanted attention, he shuffled left and right repeatedly, left and right, left and right, left and right while he mouthed various obscenities at the pregnant woman.

Sonia was still up on the dais, but she had moved away from the microphone stand to parade her impressive tummy to the musicians and the spectators.

At the blink of an eye, three things happened at once. The first was the cocktail waitress returning to Mickey and Veronica with a large glass of mineral water on a tray. The second was Brent exploding in a fit of pique and making a desperate lunge at Sonia.

The third was the sound of roughly a dozen cameras in telephones snapping photos at the exact moment Brent wrapped his fingers around Sonia's upper arm with enough force to make her contort her face in pain. The moment of violence against a pregnant woman was captured beautifully in TruColor, Hi-Definition and ClearImagePlus and had been uploaded to Facebook, Twitter and every other social media site before Brent had even realized his career-knocking mistake.

Veronica groaned out loud, but Mickey nodded with a mask of grim satisfaction on her face. "Hello world, goodbye sponsors. Hello front page, goodbye St. Aloysius. Veronica, you just got half the kingdom. Maybe all of it. Do you have your divorce lawyer on speed dial?"

"Not yet," Veronica croaked, reaching for the glass of São Sébastião. With a final glance at the scene of mass confusion, she chugged down half the fizzy contents in one gulp.

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Half an hour later, Brent had already received a phone call from the producers of his hitherto hit tv show. Slumped in one of the avant-garde armchairs in the lobby, he tried to drown his sorrows in a bottle of Scotch that he took a long swig of from time to time. His pristine white shirt still hadn't been fully tucked into his black pants, but it didn't seem he was particularly interested in keeping up appearances.

Rita Domenica, the actress whose ankles had been resting on Brent's shoulders when the shock announcement had been made, had fled the party after delivering a resounding slap to his face. Even after twenty-five minutes, a perfect print of Rita's five fingers were still visible on his rosy cheek.

Most of the partygoers had relocated to the pool where several were frolicking in the deep blue water. The mood was animated on the cheerful side of things, helped by the Lloyd Baker Trio and the female jazz singer who had followed the guests outside to play a poolside set of acoustic jazzy favorites.

All five of the circular tables around the pool were occupied by happy people who laughed, flirted and generally enjoyed themselves while they drank champagne and colorful drinks with colorful umbrellas and even more colorful names that Mickey had convinced the hired bartender to mix.

Sitting at one of the tables with a stunned Inez Villareal and a morose Veronica, Mickey tapped her foot to the bouncy beat while keeping an eye on the people playing in the pool. She grinned at the sight of a bare, female back that swam from one side to the other. A cocktail waitress delivered a new round of colorful drinks to the table, and Mickey picked a scrumptious Sex With Jennifer as her next one.

When she had taken the first, probing sip to make sure the drink was made right, she leaned over and patted Veronica's knee. The star had a tray with three balls of scrap paper on it in front of her, the legacy of two tofu burgers and a veggie special pita bread - the first nourishment she'd had for far too long.

Veronica sighed and put her hand on top of Mickey's. "It was a great idea to call for takeout, Mickey. Thank you. I feel like a ton of lead has been lifted from my shoulders... unfortunately, there's another one waiting in the wings. Literally."

"We'll deal with it. Oh boy, I can see being a personal assistant for you won't be a nine to five kinda job," Mickey joked, winking at her employer.

"No, working for me is pretty much a twenty-four-seven kinda job," Veronica said, looking over at Inez who still appeared to be stunned over the evening's developments.

When the other personal assistant realized she had been spoken to, she snapped out of her haziness and moved to get up. "Do you need anything, Miss Masterson? Perhaps another tofu burger?"

"Not another burger, Inez, but I could use a glass of São Séb..."

"Right away, Miss Masterson. I'll only be a short while," Inez said and hurried along the edge of the pool to get the mineral water.

Veronica tracked the cool, sophisticated P.A. until she reached the double doors. Then the star let out a sigh and turned back to Mickey. "She's willing to work hard... I'll give her that. I don't know if I want to keep her here. I'm worried that she'll run straight over to Brent and tell him all the things I do here. All my plans. She's been snared in by his charm... hell, she's infatuated with him."

"Veronica, you can tell me to butt out if this isn't my business, but how in the world did you and he ever hook up?" Mickey said and took a sip of her Jennifer.

"Oh, are you sure you want to hear that?"

"Uh... when you say it like that, not really," Mickey said with a grin.

"I'd love to claim he wasn't always this bad, but that would be a lie. I was one of a long line of conquests... but my first album came out to rave reviews and huge sales when we were dating. Dollar signs in his eyes, you know. He proposed and I accepted... too young and stupid to see the pitfalls of such a deal. Back then, I still believed in true love. I should have known something was fishy when he left on extended weekends even before we had walked up the aisle."

"Jeez, he cheated on you after the engagement?"

"Constantly."

Mickey stared wide-eyed at the somber star before she took a long sip of her Jennifer to get the bitter taste out of her mouth. "Excuse me for being blunt, Veronica, but that's just grotesque. You should have walked away, or kicked him in the crotch... all four inches of it."

Veronica let out a braying chuckle at the mention of her husband's lack of equipment. "Yeah... I'm beginning to agree with you. Back then, though, I--"

The moment was interrupted by Inez Villareal who came bounding down the sweeping staircase with her arms flailing everywhere and a look of sheer panic on her face. "Miss Masterson! Miss Masterson! Miss Masterson!" she cried loud enough for everyone at the pool to stop and stare.

Mickey jumped to her feet and intercepted the agitated woman before she would slip on the smooth surface and end up face-first in the pool. "Calm down, Inez! Calm down... what the hell's going on?"

"The police are out front and demand to speak with Miss Masterson and Mr. Salinger!"

"Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse," Mickey mumbled and turned back to Veronica who promptly buried her face in her hands.

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Veronica stared at Brent Salinger with disbelieving eyes as he was led away by two uniformed police officers. Brent's golden boy lawyer had already arrived and was speaking to a Detective in a frazzled suit to get all the details of his client's high-profile arrest.

"The photo went vital? What does that mean?" Veronica said, slowly shaking her head as the main entrance closed behind Brent. Her husband hadn't as much as looked over his shoulder at her.

"No, viral," Mickey said, hooking her arm inside Veronica's. "I'll explain in a little while. C'mon, let's get you seated before you fall down. That'd be hard to explain to the cops. They'd think we're running a den of filth or something..."

"And we're not? This is Hollywood... they're used to it."

"Why am I not shocked? C'mon..."

The two women shuffled over to the avant-garde armchairs where so much of the evening's action had taken place. The expensive Persian rug underneath the chairs had been wadded up into a ball of fabric by the hubbub, but neither Mickey nor Veronica could be bothered to straighten it out. Once Veronica had been placed in one of the chairs, Mickey pulled the other one close and sat down. "The photo went viral, that means it's all over the Internet. It was re-tweeted enough times to finally land at the Stop Domestic Violence Hotline who sent it to the police who came and... uh... took Brent away," she said, patting the pale star's hand.

"Mickey, is this real or a bad dream? It's a bad dream, isn't it? Tell me it's a bad dream..."

"Well, it's a bad dream for somebody... but a pretty good one for others," Mickey said, glancing around the lobby where a few of the uniformed police officers were posing for snapshots with the tuxedo-clad men and scantily clad women. Sonia was speaking to the Detective, proudly showing her tummy and the bruise on her arm where Brent had grabbed her. Though Mickey couldn't hear what was said, Sonia's lips never stopped moving so it appeared every last detail was about to be exposed to the public.

Outside the mansion, the blue and red flashing lights of an ambulance joined the mainly blue lights on the police cruisers. A paramedic unit soon entered the lobby and assisted Sonia onto a stretcher - the supporting actress knew she was in the spotlight and milked it for all it was worth.

Veronica opened her mouth to speak but couldn't get a sound across her vocal cords. She tried again and again, but eventually gave up and settled for shaking her head in a slow, despondent fashion.

While Mickey and Veronica sat there, the party was breaking up around them. Judging by the looks on the faces of the stars and starlets, it had been a smashing success. Aaron Kaye's wild appearance had grown even wilder, and he put on his black shades on his way past the police to hide the fact his pupils were so dilated they were almost as large as his eyeballs.

A few of them came over to shake Veronica's hand or pat her on the shoulder, but she was too stunned to do much beyond smiling or squeaking the occasional "Thank you."

The female jazz singer in the black spaghetti-strap dress came over near the end of the group and leaned down to pull Veronica into an overly familiar - though still respectful - hug from behind. "I hope you were satisfied with my singing tonight, Miss Masterson. I heard you're doing a new album? If you need a backup singer, I'm willing to work long hours for peanuts just to share a studio with such a natural and wonderfully gifted singer such as yourself. Yeah? Here's my card in case you—"

Veronica reached up and took the singer's hand that held the business card. A quick glance at it proved the singer's name was Marietta Nordstrom. "Marietta, please, do me a favor. Drop the bull. It only makes me want to tear up your card. Talk to me straight, not that flowery puke."

"Uh... you got it, Miss Masterson," Marietta said, cautiously eyeing the two women at the table like she couldn't quite understand why the regular spiel wasn't working. "Uh... did you like— uh... enjoy my performance tonight?"

"You did a great job, Marietta. I don't know if the album will go ahead after all this, but if it does, I'll call you."

A brief, genuine smile of relief flashed across Marietta's lips before she fell back into keeping a respectful distance to the star of stars sitting before her. "Oh, thank you! Thank you very much, Miss Masterson. I can't tell you how much it means to me. I promise I'll work hard! Have a good night... if nothing else, it was an interesting party!"

"One for the record books," Veronica said quietly, giving Marietta's hand a little squeeze. After watching the singer walk away with a spring in her step, she turned back to Mickey and leaned forward. "You've been awfully quiet lately, Mickey. Have you finally been shocked into submission by the escapades of the rich and shameless?"

"Apart from hearing you say 'bull' and 'flowery puke,' this is old hat," Mickey said with a cheeky grin and a quick little rub on the star's knee. "Don't forget, I've been dressing and undressing celebs for a couple of years now. I saw nothing new tonight, lemme tell you. It was a little different to witness it first hand instead of hearing about it, but, heh... you'd be amazed how much I've been told by stars who needed to connect."

Veronica let out a snort and leaned forward to swat at Mickey's arm. "And I'll bet you heard all kinds of stories about me, too...?"

"Some. Lies and more lies, I know that now," Mickey said and intercepted Veronica's hand so she could caress the star's slender digits.

"Mmmm?"

"Ohhhh yeah. The Ice Bitch has turned into a fairy tale queen, awright," Mickey said with a broad grin.

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At twelve minutes past two in the morning, Veronica had turned into one of the Walking Dead. Running on fumes - and the last glass of champagne from the last bottle - she staggered around trying to tell the horde of cocktail waitresses and housemaids how to clean up the mess of flutes, tumblers, bottles, colorful umbrellas and plates with half-eaten finger food. On top of that, they had the usual collection of forgotten jackets, telephones and even purses that lay scattered throughout the party zone to deal with.

While that was going on, Mickey stood poolside with her hands firmly ensconced on her hips. Down in the water, an unidentifiable brown mess bobbed around on the petite waves. She bared her teeth in a disgusted grimace and went to work searching for a net of some kind to retrieve the item.

Soon, she had the brown mess hanging off the end of a six-foot pole with a cleaning net at the far end, but while she breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn't what she had feared it was, the realization that it was someone's toupee that had gone astray didn't improve the situation much.

"Hmmm," she mumbled, considering where to put the unusual item. In the end, she draped it over the handle of the nearest aluminum ladder so they could deal with in the morning.

Job done, she dusted off her hands and put the pole with the cleaning net back into the utility shed where she had found it.

"Mickey? Mickey, are you out there? I'm turning off the pool lights now," Veronica said from her spot at the top of the sweeping staircase.

"Go ahead! I'm on my way back as we speak," Mickey shouted back, taking two steps at a time. Once she reached the top, she pulled Veronica into a small hug. "Hey, don't you think it's time for you to hit the sack? You're so pale it's gotta be unhealthy."

"Yeah, I'm almost there," Veronica said and wrapped an arm around Mickey's shoulder, much to the shorter woman's surprise. The star looked like she had something Really, Really Important to say, but she also looked like she couldn't get herself to utter the words needed to get the message across. "I have something I'd like to ask you. You can say no if it's not your thing... or if you're simply not interested," she said in a strange monotone that made it sound like she was straining to get it out.

"Sure... what exactly are we talking about? Careful, there's a doorstep."

Veronica looked down and raised her foot in an almost comical fashion to get over the metal rail at the foot of the door. Once inside, she turned towards Inez who was in command of the army of maids. "Inez, just go to bed. Drop everything... it can wait."

"Yes, Miss Masterson. I'll secure the mansion and call it a night," Inez said with a grateful smile creasing her lips. Mopping her damp brow, she turned away from Veronica and Mickey to wrap up her evening.

Mickey looked up and shot a puzzled look at the taller woman who seemed reluctant to go ahead with the promised question. It was evident it would be a while before she needed to make up her mind, because without speaking a word, Veronica shuffled off down a hallway Mickey hadn't visited yet.

They went past a couple of doors before they reached a connecting corridor that opened up into another, smaller lobby. This section of the ranch was held in warmer colors, and it was an easy task for Mickey to figure out that it was Veronica's private quarters.

Veronica opened a door on the right and led Mickey into a bedroom that was far more homey and cozy than the rest of the mansion. The walls were clad in wooden panels and the furniture was made of old-fashioned, knotted pine wood. A queen-sized bed with a romantic bedspread dominated the room that also saw a wooden swivel-chair, an antique five-drawer dresser, a full-sized wooden closet and a bureau with a flat top for writing.

"Oh, this is so cozy," Mickey said as she closed the door behind them and stepped onto a traditional woven carpet. "And it's the same size as my own apartment... huh. I wouldn't have bet on that."

"My bedroom back on the farm was this size, Mickey. That's why I had it made like this... to keep my feet on the ground."

"That's a fantastic attitude to have in this weird town... oh..." - *sniff, sniff* - "You know, even if you hadn't told me, I would have known it was your bedroom."

Veronica chuckled as she moved the bedspread aside and sat down on the duvet to take off her shoes. "And you could tell that by sniffing the air? Should I be flattered or insulted?"

"Definitely flattered. I don't know what it is, if it's your perfume or your natural scent or whatever," Mickey said and moved over to the bed to help Veronica unzip the dress, "but there's something in here that has the same warm, inviting scent that you do."

Veronica stood up and allowed Mickey to unzip her all the way down. As she turned around and shuffled over to the closet for a bathrobe, she watched the personal assistant do her job admirably by neatly fluffing the dress and putting it on the coat hanger that was ready on the door to the closet. "I suppose it could be a lot worse than warm and inviting... if I had B.O., would you tell me?"

"In a heartbeat."

"I believe you," Veronica said with a tired chuckle as she put on the white bathrobe. Yawning, she scratched her hair and shuffled over to the bureau to begin removing the makeup.

"Allow me," Mickey said and snatched the moist towelette from the star's grasp. Her skilled fingers soon stripped the layer of paint off Veronica's face and left it bare. "I must say, Veronica... you don't need any makeup. You're gorgeous on your own, you know. Some stars I've worked with don't even have a face when they're not wearing war paint, but you... you're prettier bare."

"Thank you."

"Aw, just speaking the truth..."

Veronica smiled and ran an index finger along the tender skin under her right eye. "Ouch, they're going to be so red and puffy tomorrow... all that champagne... and the lack of sleep..."

"No worries. We can fix that with a few slices of cucumber. Always works a treat."

Veronica cast a brief glimpse at Mickey's face before she looked back at the mirror. "You are too, you know," she said with a shy smile playing on her lips.

"Huh? Red and puffy? Or are ya calling me a cucumber? That's a new one..."

"You're pretty. No, you're very pretty. Your eyes are simply gorgeous and... and... your face is so... beautiful."

"Veronica, you're drunk," Mickey said with a grin, though the compliment did perform a slow burn through her that left her pleasantly heated in all the right places. The star shook her head shyly, but Mickey didn't want to pursue it. "Which reminds me... what in the hell was it you were trying to tell me back there, huh? I asked but never got a reply. What's up with that, Miss Masterson? Can't be bothered to talk to us knuckle-draggin' mouth-breathers?" Mickey said, using her old, sarcastic tone though she tempered it by adding a wink.

At first, Veronica seemed reluctant to speak her mind - illustrated graphically by the star's shoulders climbing up towards her ears - but then the knot was unraveled and she turned around to take Mickey by the hand. "Will you stay with me tonight?" she said, locking eyes with her assistant.

Mickey licked her lips while she processed the request. *'Gosh golly, it's tempting... no doubt about that. Maybe she's suffered a shock too many over the course of the evening to really understand what she just offered, though...'* - "You know, ah... that has a different meaning for someone like me than it does for someone like you."

"Has it?" Veronica said and reached up to loosen the knot on Mickey's tie.

Once the tie had been dealt with, the first, then the second, then the third button were undone on Mickey's white shirt. The third button was at the height of her bra-covered breasts, but she stopped the star's roaming hand before things went too far. "I don't want to have sex with you tonight, Veronica. That's not the kind of woman I am. Not only are you technically still married, you're way too tired and tipsy to enjoy it. You'll only end up regretting it in the morning and that would kill this gig stone dead. No."

"Oh... I'm sor--"

"What I will do is spend the night here with you. We can even share the bed... but we need to take things slowly. For the time being, I am your personal assistant. Okay?"

Lowering her hands into her lap, Veronica nodded but kept her eyes on Mickey's face. "Okay. You're right... I don't want to ruin it. Do you have anything to sleep in? You can borrow a t-shirt or something. I've just bought a new toothbrush, so... so..."

"I'll find it," Mickey said with a laugh. "C'mon, let's get you into your nightgown or whatever you use. I'll bet you'll fall asleep before your head hits the pillow, anyway."

"Boxers and a Bugs Bunny sleeping gown..."

"Aw, ain't that too cute? Hey..." Mickey said and leaned down to caress the star's cheek. "Things are improving, Veronica. I know there's gonna be shit with the lawyers, but at least Brent's out of your hair. You didn't have to do your midnight speech so your career wasn't harmed... all in all, I'd say you got the long stick in the draw."

"And I got you... maybe?"

"Mmmm... maybe," Mickey said with a cheesy grin that proved it was a done deal. "Let's try that kissy thing again to see if we really are compatible," she said and leaned down towards Veronica's enticing lips.

"Oh, you!" Veronica breathed, but her lips were soon too busy to speak.

To Mickey, the kiss was exactly like the woman she shared it with: sweet, warm and electrifying. Their mouths mingled and were soon joined by their tongues and ultimately their souls.

Though she and Veronica were still finding each other, the sensations that rolled through Mickey as the effects of the kiss reached every last part of her made her reconsider her tough stance on not having sex, especially when Veronica moaned into her mouth, but she was nothing if not a woman of principle. Thus, she stood firm.

*'And there's always tomorrow... it's gonna be a big weekend,'* she thought before she really put her back into kissing Lady Blu who had turned out to be the exact opposite of the world class ice bitch that everyone had said she was...

**THE END.**