

The third of the young women, twenty-four year old Emanuela Esposito chimed in by reaching over and poking Mickey in the back with her elbow. "Musta been. You remembered to get her name, right?" she said, holding a lit cigarette inside her fist.

"Ha, ha. I wish! Naw, I was working the whole stinking night at Duffy's Dipper."

"Ouch," Allie said, nodding in sympathy.

Mickey shrugged and wiped her eyes again. "Eh... it's a living."

Echoing the nod of sympathy, Emanuela took a hit of her cigarette and then put a finger in the air like she wanted to be excused. "Oooh, it's gonna be a big night tonight!" she said while the pale blue smoke wafted out of her mouth in waves. "Everybody's coming to the Valentine's Day special. I'm talking everybody! All the golden boys and girls are gonna be here tonight. The network's hoping for a huge TV share... they gotta have it 'cos they've spent so much on the artists."

"That's right, Emanuela," Allie said while discreetly fanning the smoke away from her. "Did you hear who the headlining act will be?"

"No, but I can guess!" Emanuela said excitedly.

Mickey was less excited by the prospects of another late night in general - and Emanuela's cigarette smoke in particular - so she merely snorted and wiped her nose that had begun to tickle. "I can't. Who's the golden goose tonight, Allie?"

"Lady Blu!" Allie said, nodding emphatically.

Emanuela let out a squeal and thumped Mickey's back again. "Awwww, she's so gorgeous! Like, one of the most gorgeous women ever! Hey, Mickey, there's a good catch for ya!"

"Yeah, right..." Mickey said and rolled her eyes repeatedly while giving the bubblegum a strong workout. "Yeah, right... me and Lady Blu... yeah, right. And next week, I'm gonna win the Powerball. Need I remind ya that not only is she married to Mr. Hollywood Big Actor Bulging Pants, she's got a reputation of being a world class bitch?"

"Well, sure, but reputations can be deceiving, right? I mean, just look at you-"

"Oh, ha, ha, flippin' ha!"

To settle the argument before it got out of hand, Allie cleared her throat which made the other two pipe down and look at her. "I've worked on a show she's been on. She wasn't the easiest to deal with, I'll give you that, but she wasn't the most difficult either."

"Mmmm," Mickey said, shoving her hands into her jeans pockets, "I've heard that she was such a bitch to an assistant over at All-American the poor girl ran away crying hysterically."

"Heard that, too," Allie said - Emanuela nodded and grunted as well.

While the trio was contemplating the unpleasant news with a grunt, a puff, and a chew respectively, two more assistants drove into the parking lot and stepped out of their cars. Waves were quickly traded, and soon, the trio had grown to a quintet.

Mickey made way for her colleagues under the umbrellas, but the discussion soon turned so hen-housy that she wanted to get on with the program. "Guys... hey... guys!" she said, clapping her hands to get the attention of the others.

Once she had it, she folded her hands in front of her chest and assumed a dark, no-nonsense expression. "We're freezing our asses off out here 'cos you have to smoke like an eighteen-wheeler going uphill, Emanuela-"

"I beg your pardon!" Emanuela said and look a long whiff just to demonstrate.

"-but before they're gone altogether, let's perform the ancient, sacred ritual. Let's draw lots. And I'm tellin' you right now, ladies, ain't no way, no WAY I'm working with Lady Blu tonight!"

Allie chuckled and reached into the purse she had over her shoulder. After a few seconds, she pulled out the paraphernalia for said sacred ritual - a pack of multi-colored, plastic drinking straws where roughly one-third of them had been cut in half. "Let's see about that, Mickey. Okay, we do what we always do... the one who first gets the straw that's been cut is the loser and she automatically goes last when it comes to choosing a celeb. Here ya go... Mickey, you should start first."

"Here goes. Red is my favorite color," Mickey said and reached for a bright red straw. Narrowing her eyes, she chewed vigorously on her bubblegum as she began to pull it out of the pack. At first, everything was going fine, but then her luck ran out and she was left holding half a straw. "Oh... fu—" she breathed around the suddenly unwanted wad of gum, staring at the manifestation of her rotten luck.

Emanuela whooped but was soon shushed by the others. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Mickey... looks like you'll have to go last."

Mickey resumed chewing on her bubblegum, but now it was to hide the stream of nastiness that would have escaped if she hadn't. After a few seconds of shock, it dawned on her that she needed to spend an evening pampering the star none of the others wanted to work with. "Oh. Isn't. That. Just. Peachy?" she growled under her breath. Moments later, she blew a huge, pink bubble that smelled of artificial cherry just to thumb her nose at Lady Fortune - and Lady Blu.

"Wait, guys," Mickey tried once the bubble had burst, but the others were too busy placing their marker on their favorite star. "Guys... please... it's just not gonna-

Nobody had time to listen to Mickey, so she dug her hands into her pockets and moped for all she was worth. When even that didn't have any effect on her friends and colleagues, she tried another approach that worked nine times out of ten - bribing.

"Emanuela, remember you said you wanted to see the song and dance show down in the Odeon but couldn't afford the seats?"

"Yeah? Go on," Emanuela said, keeping one eye on Mickey while she kept up to speed with the conversation so she wouldn't end up catching somebody the others wouldn't want to work with.

"Well, I was thinking that... that... I could... maybe, you know... buy it for you...?" Mickey said, shuffling around on the spot.

Emanuela briefly looked at Mickey with both eyes, but the Latina was soon back to the serious matters. "Nice try. Sorry, Mickey."

"Oh, fer cryin' out loud... do you want me to beg? Huh? If you want me to go down on my knees and beg, then by gosh golly, I'll do that," Mickey said and knelt down on the wet asphalt. "Guys! Please! You can't leave me with The Bitchy One! She'll either kill me or I'll kill her and I don't want that 'cos my rent is due next weekend and I don't have it yet. I need this money, okay? I won't make what I could have if I end up with Miss Tall an' Bitchy!"

Allie held up her hands to temporarily put a freeze on the hen house. "Mickey, I'm sorry, but you lost the draw fair and square. You've won enough of them to know that moaning about it won't do you any good. And get up from there before you ruin your jeans," she said, putting out an arm.

Mickey grunted and used the leverage to get back up. "But guys..." she whined in an awful, nasal pitch, "I'm your friend! ...At least, I thought I was... pleeeeeease, you can't leave me with Miss Bit-"

"Mickey, it's settled. You lost," Allie said in a tone of voice that proved that Mickey's attempts at rectifying the situation had failed.

Snorting, Mickey wiped her nose on the back of her hand while resuming her vigorous chewing. With a sigh, she went on a slow tour of the women present, casting a sour look at each of them to make sure they all got the message loud and clear. "Yeah, I lost. All right, all right. But it still blows!"

"*Oh, ladies, there you are!*" a male voice said from across the parking lot. "*We need you inside on the double!*"

Turning around, Mickey quickly recognized a backstage runner she had worked with before. The twenty-something man was standing in the doorway at the rear entrance to the studio wearing a headset that seemed slightly too large for him - he also held an electronic device in his hand that he waved furiously at the women to catch their attention.

"We better go, girls," Allie said and shot a pointed look at Emanuela to make her stub out her cigarette.

Walking with the others, Mickey zoomed in on the undoubtedly expensive piece of electronics the runner was holding. "Careful wavin' that thing around. You could end up regretting-"

Even as Mickey was speaking, the tablet left the runner's hand in the middle of a wave but he managed to catch it at the very last moment before it would have shattered against the asphalt outside the door.

"Yeah, like that," Mickey said and blew a huge bubble. She smirked at her foresight, hoping it meant she'd have a stroke of good luck for a change, but then she remembered who her star was going to be. Symptomatically, her bubble burst.

"Ladies, we're glad you're here. You'll be joined by, uh... seven more PAs for this show," the backstage runner said once the five women had come inside the rear entrance. Beyond the door, a large hallway led to the backstage area and then the stage itself, but the personal assistants would only go there when they escorted their star to and from a performance. The rest of the time, they would be inside one of the thirty dressing rooms that ran the length of the building in two narrow corridors.

Up close, it was easy to see how frazzled the runner was. Not only did his white t-shirt sport large, dark spots under the armpits, his cheeks were flushed and there was a sheen of sweat on his brow. "I see that most of you have worked with us before so I'll settle for doing the abbreviated version of my welcoming speech," he said, looking down at the tablet.

Mickey wanted to groan loudly but wisely kept it on the inside. Looking at her friends and colleagues, she recognized the exact same expression she had just worn - an expression that said *'Oh hell, not the speech again!'*

"The West Coast Broadcasting Corporation welcomes you to their renowned Studio Two. Though you have all signed freelance contracts, may we remind you that tonight, you're to act as ambassadors for the WCBC. In short... be polite, smile, no foul language, smile, no arguments with anyone, smile, laugh at their jokes no matter how silly or insulting, smile, follow their wishes and requests, smile, what happens in the dressing rooms stays in the dressing rooms, smile, no drinking, no smoking, no popping pills, smile, smile, smile. The VIPs will arrive shortly. Let's have a clean evening with no drama, no hysteria and no lawsuits. You got all that?"

"Yes, Sir!" Mickey barked merrily, snapping to attention and offering the backstage runner a strict salute.

At first, the runner just stared at her, but he soon snarled and made a note on his tablet. "All right, who's in dressing room number one? Who's got the guest of honor, the esteemed Lady Blu?" he said, looking at the five women.

"Ah, that would be me, Sir," Mickey said and waved her fingers in the air.

The runner grunted and went over to a small table just inside the hallway from where he took a piece of paper. "All right. Miss Delany, right?"

"That's right, Sir."

"Here's your order form. Please pay close attention to it. You'll find the items already put into number one, but you'll need to arrange them according to the VIP's wishes," he said, handing the paper to Mickey.

"Yep... I know," Mickey said, skimming the surprisingly brief list of requests. It only had five items on it which was less than she had expected. "Uh, yep. Number one is... over there, right...?" she said, pointing to her right while chewing hard on her gum.

"Over there. The first one," the runner said, pointing in the opposite direction.

Mickey nodded and offered the man a thumbs-up. "Okie-dokie. Hey girls, let's get the most out of it, okay?"

The other personal assistants all laughed and waved at Mickey, knowing that she was merely trying to make a bad draw sufferable. "Definitely!" Emanuela said and waved back at her friend.

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Stepping inside dressing room number one, Mickey turned on the light in the ceiling to verify that everything was in order.

The dressing rooms were of a modest size save for the first three that had been designed to act as super-VIP lounges. At fifteen by twelve feet, even they weren't too spacious, especially not when they were fully stocked with costumes, make-up accessories and the items requested by the VIPs. On top of that, the rooms were equipped with two chairs, a metal wardrobe rack on wheels and a full-sized mirror with a wooden shelf underneath.

Like in the old days, the mirror could be lit up to assist the application of the make-up and the costumes, but the technology had moved on from the old-fashioned naked light bulbs to built-in LEDs that did a far better job of casting the spotlight onto the star.

With a satisfied nod, Mickey turned on the LED panels inside the mirror and began to study the order form. Mumbling, chewing and pointing while following the list, she went from the required make-up on the shelf, over to the wardrobe rack where all three costumes were ready in large, dark gray zipper-bags, to the pristine, white bathrobe in a highly feminine cut, and finally over to the cardboard box with the items Lady Blu had requested.

"All right, the basics are all here," Mickey mumbled and wiped her brow with the back of her hand while she ran her hands over the cardboard box. Lifting the wings, she peeked into it and immediately spotted a couple of bottles. A slightly high-hatted grunt escaped her lips as she began to remove the items from the box.

"Let's see what Miss Tall'n'Snooty wants," she said, checking the order form. "A Lana é Mara bathrobe, white, check. A Family Life Today magazine, the latest issue, check. Two bottles of imported mineral water, São Sébastião, check. A Holmegaard smooth-edged, frosted glass tumbler... uh... uh...? Where's the... oh... there's no..." Mickey said, practically diving into the cardboard box to find the missing item.

"There's no Holmegaard smooth-edged, frosted glass tumbler! Aw, hell! And who's gonna get blamed for that!? I am, that's a gosh golly fact!" she growled, throwing down the empty cardboard box before storming out of dressing room number one.

The hallway proved to be deserted save for one of the other personal assistants who had arrived late. There was no sign of the backstage runner anywhere, but Mickey knew the niggles of the missing tumbler had to be dealt with quickly, or else it would escalate into an issue, then a problem, and finally into a kick up her rear end that would send her out into the proverbial snow.

"Hey!" she said loudly to catch the attention of the other personal assistant who was about to go into a dressing room further up the corridor.

The woman pointed at herself and looked over her shoulder. "Yeah, you... you're the only one here, ain'tcha?" Mickey said, hurrying up the corridor. "Did you see the runner anywhere? You know, the dude in the headset and with the sweaty pits who-"

"Sure," the other woman said, pointing past Mickey, "he went backstage... up the-"

"I know where that is," Mickey said, spinning around on her heel. Almost as an afterthought, she added a "Thanks!" over her shoulder on her way around the corner.

"Wait, wait, wait... you wanna run that by me again?" Mickey whined nasally. "When you say you don't have a Holmegaard smooth-edged, frosted glass tumbler, you mean... what, exactly?"

After a great deal of searching, she had found the backstage runner overseeing the vacuuming of the red carpet at the final staircase that led to the stage itself. He had a sour look on his face, but it was hard to say whether it came from Mickey interrupting him, or the problem she was there to report.

"That we don't have one," the runner said briskly before turning back to monitor the woman vacuuming the red carpet.

"Oh, fer cryin' out loud... you gotta be kidding!"

"No. We only got one and it was cracked. You don't expect us to give the most important artist at the show a cracked tumbler, do you?"

"No, but... what the hell am I supposed to do now?"

The runner turned back to Mickey and shot her a dark glare. "Use your imagination."

"My imagination? Didn't you just give us a speech on the number of ways we're supposed to kiss their asses? Oh, this is off to a flippin' fantastic start," Mickey said, rubbing her face. Much to her dismay, her cherry-flavored bubblegum lost its flavor at the worst possible moment, and she threw the well-chewed wad into a trash can next to the red carpet.

"Go over to the cafeteria and find another tumbler. How difficult can it be?" the runner said in a tone of voice that said in no uncertain manner that Mickey should stop bothering him.

Mickey blinked a couple of times and swallowed a whole broadside of barbs that she had lined up and ready to fire. "I will. But mark my words, Lady Blu is gonna know the difference... she's gonna know the difference, buddy!"

Ten minutes later, Mickey hurried back to dressing room number one holding the borrowed, regular drinking glass in both hands like it was a newborn pup she wanted to protect. Storming towards the corner, she suddenly heard Allie and Emanuela speaking in the corridor - and she heard them saying her name.

That alone piqued her interest and she came to an abrupt halt and sneaked along the wall the rest of the way towards the corner so she could listen in on her friends without being spotted.

'So,' Allie said disbelievingly, '*you've set up a bet that says Mickey will be thrown out by Lady Blu or the management before the show is over?*'

'*That's right!*' Emanuela said.

'That's unfair, Emanuela. Mickey's a friend... we shouldn't wish that bad things will happen to her...'

'I know, but... you know I love her, but she can be a handful at times.'

'Mmmm. What's the stake?'

'Twenty bucks. We're all in it except one of the new girls who's a Mormon.'

'Mmmm. No, sorry. I don't want to be a part of that bet.'

'Uh... okay. That means the pool is two hundred dollars. Uh... if you want me to call it off, I will, Allie...?'

'No, you can continue, but don't expect it to be a done deal. Mickey's a fighter, you know that.'

'Oh, I do!' Emanuela said and broke out in a snicker. 'That's why I set up the bet in the first place!'

The undeniable logic of that statement made Allie chuckle, a warm sound that was quickly followed by a thump on Emanuela's shoulder.

"Oh, isn't that just peachy," Mickey mumbled as she stood up straight. "I'll show 'em... ha! I'll show 'em, those... mmmm!"

After running back ten steps or so to gain sufficient speed, Mickey took off and swept around the corner in a hurry. As she came up to Allie and Emanuela, she could see the guilt and embarrassment etched into their faces. She knew they had to be thinking about how much she had heard, but she decided not to show her hand. "Hi guys," she said cheerily. "There was something missing from the box so I had to get a replacement. Are you good to go?"

"Uh, yeah," Emanuela said, scratching the side of her nose.

"Great. Well, see ya 'round, okay? Gotta hustle before the Ice Queen gets here," Mickey said and practically jumped into dressing room number one.

Once inside, she rolled her eyes repeatedly as she put the borrowed tumbler on the shelf below the mirror next to the two bottles of mineral water. To be on the safe side, she went through the order form again and found that everything was ready for Lady Blu. "I can't believe they're betting against me... my friends!" she said, looking at herself in the mirror. "But I'll show 'em... I'll show 'em but good!"

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Just over an hour before the televised event was scheduled to start, the backstage runner - who was still wielding his headset and his indispensable tablet - hurried through the two corridors on both sides of the central hallway. At each dressing room, he tapped twice on the door and said "Get ready, the first VIPs are coming! Get ready!"

Inside dressing room number one, Mickey put away the issue of Family Life Today she had been reading and smoothed down the glittery pages so it wouldn't appear second-hand. Yawning, she stretched her body this way and that to be ready for what would undoubtedly be an uphill struggle for the rest of the evening.

"Now Mickey, remember to suck up to her and smile while you do it," she mumbled, looking at herself in the mirror. When her lips and cheeks didn't want to play ball, she reached up and hooked her index fingers inside the corners of her mouth. "Smile while you do it... smile while you do it... smile while you do it," she chanted, giving herself a facelift of the rather undignified kind.

As soon as she let go, her cheeks flopped down to their regular position. "Ah, screw that," she said, waving in disgust at the mirror.

When she heard what sounded like a limo door slamming somewhere out in the parking lot, she tip-toed over to her own door to peek out. She suddenly realized all the other personal assistants had lined up outside their dressing rooms like a regiment of cadets on their first day at the military academy. She wouldn't want to stick out - too much - so she hurried outside and snapped to strict attention like the rest of them.

The first limousine delivered a silver fox crooner in his late sixties who had a reputation for pinching the PAs butts. As Mickey tracked the well-dressed man with her eyes, she was saddened for her friend Emanuela when the man stopped at her door and offered her a blinding smile. Though it had been Emanuela who had organized the bet against her, they were still colleagues and friends, and Mickey knew exactly what it felt like to have her butt pinched repeatedly by a total stranger.

When the first limo left, another was ready to take its place. The backstage runner hurried over to the door to act as the welcoming committee, but despite Mickey's best efforts at craning her neck to see who it was, the next VIP wasn't Lady Blu either but a much-lauded African-American gospel singer in her late forties.

Wearing a highly elegant silver dress, the woman was all smiles, and she made sure to go all the way down the line of personal assistants to shake their hands before she went in with number six.

"Psst," Mickey whispered to Allie who moved her head almost unnoticeably to look in Mickey's direction, "it's not too late to swap... I promise I'll take really good care of the people you're getting. You'll love Lady Blu, I promise!"

"Mmmm!" Allie said and looked straight ahead.

"No, wait, wait!" Mickey whispered hoarsely, "I... I... can't we... I can't... I'm sure the stories about her are phoney! You know, mud-slinging to make someone else look better!"

"In that case," Allie whispered back, "you should be able to enjoy yourself in her company... right?"

Mickey realized she wasn't getting her message across and settled for grunting. A world class pout spread over her features, but even that didn't sway Allie into giving her a helping hand.

A third limo had arrived in the meantime, but that turned out to be a husband-and-wife team of canon singers that Mickey knew could perform a mean swingin' duet. The married couple briefly said hi to her before they stopped at Allie's dressing room and shook her hand.

With the excitement over for the time being, Mickey grunted and went back inside dressing room number one. As she closed the door, she gave the corridor one last look to see if another limo had arrived, but the parking lot was empty. "Good. Maybe Miss Frosty Bitch has broken a leg... or an arm... or her ass... or her neck," she mumbled as she closed the door with a soft *phlum*.

Not long after, Mickey checked her wristwatch and began to make a rough guesstimate of the time it would take her to get Lady Blu ready for the opening act. The time she needed and the time she had at her disposal were at each other's throats which would obviously end up as yet another problem to add to the already lengthy list - on the other hand, she didn't really know if she could be bothered to fret over it.

A commotion in the corridor that turned into an excited squeal made Mickey roll her eyes and get on her feet. From her years of experience, she knew that excited squeals in corridors could only mean one thing - the Star of Stars had arrived.

Peeking out, Mickey spotted an unfathomably large limousine driving up to the rear entrance. "How in the hell did that huge thing even get into the parking lot?" she mumbled as she closed the door behind her and stepped out into the corridor.

The limo performed a turn worthy of a supertanker to line up with the door, but even so, it had to back up a few yards to hit the spot where a small red carpet had been laid out in the meantime.

Mickey looked around at the other personal assistants who were there with her. For some reason, it seemed that everyone whose VIP hadn't arrived yet had turned up hoping to see the Big Kahuna. The other women whispered excitedly among themselves, but Mickey just groaned and polished her shoes on the back of her jeans.

Despite her bluster, she had to admit she was getting a little nervous. She tried to chill out and get her shoulders to settle back down into a normal position instead of hanging out somewhere around her ears, but there was so much excitement building in the corridor she couldn't focus on herself. *'Boy, I've heard so many stories about the Bitchy One... Gosh golly, I hope that at least some of them have been exaggerated... I can't afford to get an ulcer...'*

Huffing and puffing, the backstage runner stormed through the hallway and blasted out of the rear entrance. There, he hurriedly opened the limo door and took a respectful step back to be out of the way of the headlining act.

Veronica Masterson - better known by her stage name Lady Blu - put an endless leg out of the limo and down onto the asphalt. The leg was quickly followed by the rest of her being, a five foot eleven singing superstar of Olympian proportions.

Standing up straight, the pant suit-wearing Veronica didn't even acknowledge the man who had opened the door before she set off in a gait akin to a queen on her way to the New Year's levee.

Mickey had to admit the Star was quite the looker. From her vantage point at the door to dressing room number one, it wasn't hard to see why Veronica Masterson had made such an impression in the five years she had been a celebrity - she had 'it', that undefinable 'it' that made people buy her music simply to drool over the cover.

Veronica's square, smoke-tinted shades did a good job of hiding her eyes and thus her emotions from the interested onlookers, but the thin, pale lines in her face where other people had lips proved that she was unhappy about something.

Mickey gulped as the tall woman strode closer and closer to her. Even wearing regular clothes, Lady Blu was still better dressed than anything Mickey had in her meager closet, and she suddenly felt way out of her league in her jeans, her t-shirt and her vest.

'It's the heart that's important, not the clothes,' she thought, but at the same time added a slightly bitter *'Yeah, right!'*

When Veronica reached dressing room number one, Mickey jumped forward with her hand extended ahead of her and a surprisingly honest smile on her lips. "Good evening, Miss Masterson. We're so pleased to see you here at the big Valentine's Day event. The West Coast Broadcasting Corporation hopes you'll have a pleasant evening. Dressing room number one is ready for you. My name is Mickey Delany and I'll be your personal-"

Without uttering a single word, Veronica strode right past Mickey's outstretched hand and over to the door to dressing room number one. Once there, she opened it, slid inside and closed it again.

Mickey was frozen to the spot in the middle of the corridor. Her hand was still hanging in mid-air, but it slowly fell down her side - a move that was accompanied by her jaw that ended up fairly slack.

A collective gasp was heard from the other personal assistants who hadn't left. As Mickey turned to look at them with a dark frown tainting her fair brow, they dispersed rather urgently and hurried into their own dressing rooms.

Suddenly the door to dressing room number one was reopened and Veronica Masterson appeared in the doorway wearing the same, non-expressive expression she had worn when she waltzed past Mickey. By now, however, she had taken off her shades which sent the full force of her husky blues zinging through the air and ultimately into a head-on collision with Mickey.

Mickey sighed and screwed on a smile. "I'll be with you in a second, Miss Masterson," she fawned, but by then, Lady Blu had already withdrawn into the dressing room.

Once inside, Mickey briefly let her eyes roam over the upper body of Veronica who had taken off her blazer jacket to reveal an off-white button-down shirt with wide lapels. Mickey tried to be very professional about it, but there was no denying that her eyes stopped here and there while they were on their merry trek across the Star's sculpted landscape.

Sighing, Veronica pulled out one of the two chairs and sat down. At first, she just stared into the mirror, but then she turned around and waved at Mickey in the gesture that had meant *get on with it!* since the dawn of time.

Mickey grumbled inwardly but moved across the modest dressing room to get to the first of the dark gray zipper-bags. Remembering to wear a smile at all times, she unzipped the bag and took out the first costume.

The sight of a blood red dress almost made her breath hitch, and it did hitch when she dug out a pair of red silk gloves that were so long they would reach even Lady Blu's elbows. "All right, Miss Masterson. Here we go," Mickey said, smiling for all she was worth. "Oh, this is a very nice costume. Red is definitely your color. Did you pick it yourself?"

Stony silence.

'All right,' Mickey thought, *'if that's the game we're playing, you better watch your ass, Sister, 'cos I can play it too! Only in reverse!'* - "We have, oh, twenty minutes to get into this costume so we shouldn't have a problem. May I suggest you start to get undressed, Miss Masterson? Of course, we can just put the costume over your regular clothes, but-"

Out of nowhere, Veronica suddenly began humming a song that Mickey presumed was the opening act of the Valentine's Day show. The song was an old swing standard called *Love Is Like A Wheel Of Fortune* that had been given a second lease of life by being prominently placed on her first platinum-selling album.

'I don't believe it!' Mickey thought, shaking her head. *'It's like I'm not here at all! On the other hand, it's a pretty good song... I can definitely see her sing and dance to it in this thing... hubba-hubba.'* - Only then did Mickey notice that the Star had spoken to her. "Whassat? I'm sorry?"

"I said," Lady Blu hissed, pinning Mickey to the spot with an ice cold glare, "take off my shoes. Are you hard of hearing or simply a dim bulb?"

"Take off your shoes? Oh, I'm so sorry, I wasn't aware you had a back injury that prevented you from doing that yourself," Mickey said in the most angelic, sing-song voice she could muster.

The flippant reply seemed to come as a complete surprise to the Star who spun around and really shot fire with her eyes. "I'm not used to my PAs talking back to me like that."

"Well, Miss Masterson, maybe you're just not used to having PAs who have an actual backbone. I do. Now stand still while I grovel at your precious feet," Mickey growled, returning every bit of the gesture the Star had just sent her way.

Veronica blinked a couple of times but seemed stumped for a stinging reply. Instead, she sat down on the chair and crossed her legs so her left shoe hung in the air.

Mickey quickly did the job she was there for and put both the star's shoes on a bottom rung inside the wardrobe rack. While she did that, she could see out of the corner of her eye that Lady Blu got to her feet and began to unbutton her slacks. *'Well, well, well, maybe my words got through to her! Ha!'* she thought, allowing herself the liberty of a brief, satisfied smirk.

"Miss Masterson, there's a bathrobe ready for you if you're uncomfortable. If you need a hand undressing, just let me know. That's what I'm here for," Mickey said with the sweetness of a vial of liquid saccharine.

For the first time, it seemed to register with Veronica that she had actually met a worthy opponent - there was even a hint of a smile playing on her lips as she turned around to look Mickey deeply in the eye. "Thank you," she eventually said in a velvety voice that was warmer than it had been.

Mickey waited for further words of wisdom, but nothing came. *'Boy, she's high maintenance. At least she isn't being too bitchy, but... huh, she's nothing like I expected her to be... weird.'*

Veronica's exquisite slacks briefly pooled at her ankles, but Mickey had already knelt down to help the Star of Stars undress.

Wearing an even wider satisfied smirk, Mickey fluffed the pants before she folded them neatly and hung them on the inside bar of a coat hanger.

Veronica's button-down shirt soon followed which meant she was standing in dressing room number one only wearing a very nice set of skin-colored lingerie. Without a word, the tall woman looked down at herself and subsequently crossed her arms over her chest.

Sobering slightly, Mickey recognized the look of shyness and embarrassment in the VIP's blue eyes and worked fast and efficiently to help her cover up. "Here you go, Miss Masterson," she said as she held up the red dress. "This one zips in the back so we don't have to get it over your head. That'll save your 'do. All right, your arms, please."

Offering her dresser a faint smile, Veronica put her arms behind her and helped pull up the red garment once it was in place. The red knock-out dress was soon zipped and adjusted to line up just right across the bosom and the rear.

"How does that feel, Miss Masterson?" Mickey said, still wearing the manic smirk though her cheeks were beginning to grow tired. "Is that all right? It's on really well back here."

"It'll do. Thank you," Veronica said and turned to look at herself in the full-sized mirror. She apparently liked what she saw because her face was slowly transformed into a cool mask of suaveness that changed her appearance completely. Flicking a few locks of hair out of the right shoulder strap, she let out a satisfied grunt. "Shoes," she said sharply,

holding out her hand. When nothing happened, she narrowed her eyes and repeated the command in a voice that had grown colder. "I said, the new shoes."

'Whoa, this broad can flip-flop on a dime,' Mickey thought as she reached down to take the shoes that went with the red dress. '... and why hasn't she used my name even once? Doesn't she give a damn, or can't she remember it? Let's test that theory...'

"A command like that helps if you add my name, Miss Masterson. Otherwise, I'm thinking you have me confused for a lackey. It's Angie," Mickey said as she knelt down to help the star put on the pointy, four-inch heeled shoes.

The result wasn't long in coming - 'Lady Blu' snapped around and snarled at the PA's impertinence.

"Oh my," Mickey said and clapped her hands together, "what a lovely pair of fangs you have! I'll bet they're just perfect for tearing chunks out of the poor, innocent PAs you usually end up with."

A few moments went by where roughly seven different reactions flashed across the Star's face - and if looks could kill, Mickey would have been dead seven times over. After a short while, Veronica calmed down and let out a sound that was a cross between a snort and a grunt. "Did you forget your own name? When I came, you said your name was Mickey Delany."

"Oh, it still is, Miss Masterson," Mickey said, dusting off her hands on her way up.

"I beg your pardon?"

Mickey walked over to the wardrobe on wheels to zip the bag she had taken the red dress from. After adding a checkmark on a piece of paper that laid out the details of the three costumes, she clicked off the ball point pen and put it away. "Oh, it's just that you haven't called me by my name... not once. I just thought you didn't care... 's all," she said, feeling the two blue orbs burn holes in the back of her head.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Veronica said coolly, not bothering to even try to mask the sarcasm in her voice, "I wasn't aware we were meant to be bosom buddies. I'll make a note of it... Mickey."

Mickey grunted and held up the two long gloves. "Thank you, Miss Masterson. That's all I can ask for. All right, the gloves are ready. Your hands, please."

While Mickey was concentrating hard on helping Veronica put on the endless gloves, the Star's blue eyes softened and even gained a faint sparkle. Veronica cocked her head as she observed the blonde move the gloves up her long arms, stopping every now and then to get them to line up properly and to make sure the fabric didn't wrinkle.

Once everything was in place, Lady Blu threw her head to make her long, dark hair cascade perfectly. Spinning around, she posed in front of the mirror and once again assumed the cool, even arrogant look she seemed to have as her stage persona.

Behind her, Mickey folded her arms across her chest and let her eyes roam down over her latest creation. All in all, she was satisfied, even if her subject was so hard to read she might as well be speaking an alien language. "All right. And now, the hair."

"Don't you dare touch it. My hair is perfect as it is," 'Lady Blu' said coldly, flicking a few locks into the right position before taking the powder puff to go to work on her face.

"As you wish, my Lord," Mickey said and performed an exaggerated bow to go with the devious insult. "In that case, please allow me to wish you a broken leg or two."

The sound that came from Veronica Masterson was most likely meant to be taken as a chuckle, but it was hard to tell - and on top of that, the blue eyes nearly made the full-size mirror crack as they sought out and locked onto Mickey's green orbs.

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Right on schedule, the televised event started at a quarter past eight on the dot. As the lights went up and the show's tuxedo-clad host bounded onto the stage to begin his introductory spiel, Mickey and 'Lady Blu' were standing just off the stage with the other PAs and their VIPs who were to take part in the opening act. Everybody looked nervous but ready to perform.

Mickey cast a glance at Veronica whose expression was set in stone. On the walk to the stage, the tall woman had effortlessly slipped into the position of the show's biggest attraction, and as such, she was quite simply unapproachable for anyone but Mickey and the backstage manager right next to them who controlled when the VIPs should go onto the stage.

The backdrop briefly fluttered aside, allowing Mickey a glimpse of the sold-out studio that resembled a concert hall. Seating six thousand, WCBC's Studio Two was the biggest in town and was often leased out to rival companies in exchange for a hefty sum of money.

Pre-show entertainment had warmed up the spectators before the broadcast had started, and they were going well, lapping up the cheerful presence of the show's host who was setting the tone for the big event by reciting a love poem he read off a teleprompter hidden from the cameras.

Ever since the backstage manager had been next to Mickey and 'Lady Blu', he had received an endless stream of crackling news in his headset, but he suddenly held up his right hand at Mickey and began to count down from five.

Mickey nodded and leaned in to whisper "Your cue. Knock 'em flat," into Veronica's ear before she gave her a very gentle push on her back, noticing - much to her surprise - that the Star was trembling.

Beyond the backdrop, the host closed his spiel and left stage-left to a fairly strong applause. When the first bars of *Love Is Like A Wheel Of Fortune* began playing, 'Lady Blu' strode up the staircase and onto the stage to an applause that could only be described as thunderous.

While the Star of Stars was singing and wiggling back and forth to the mid-tempo swing standard, she was joined by a co-ed chorus line of top-professional dancers who were all dressed like guests and employees at a casino. The highly skilled troupe went through an array of impressive moves all around the stage, splitting, high-kicking, wiggling, jumping and posing for all they were worth.

Mickey grinned at the sight of the many long-legged females, but remembered to be far enough back so she couldn't be seen by the spectators or the cameras.

"Hi, Mickey," Allie whispered into Mickey's ear. The senior PA was there with the husband-and-wife canon singers who were getting ready to go on next. "Wow, Lady Blu can really sing, huh?"

"Oh, that's nothing, Allie. You should hear when she's hissing!" Mickey whispered back with a devious grin on her lips.

"How is it going?"

"Pretty much okay, actually. I'll live. But she's kinda... huh, different from what I had expected," Mickey whispered, turning back to the stage. "I dunno what it is, but... she's kinda different."

"Not as bitchy?"

"Naw, she's bitchy all right!" Mickey said and let out a snorting laugh.

The snort made the backstage manager jump up and storm over to the PAs. Once there, he ran his finger over his throat in the age-old *can it or else!* gesture.

Mickey got the message and held up her hands in defeat.

Three minutes later, she escorted the glowing 'Lady Blu' back to dressing room number one. The Star was carrying her pointy shoes rather than wearing them, but she did so with quiet dignity, something Mickey saw as a good sign - at least she hadn't blamed her for the shoes being a poor fit.

"Allow me, Miss Masterson," Mickey said and hurried over to the door to hold it open for the star. When she was rewarded with a tired smile, she wondered if it really was the same singer who had just spent the better part of half an hour bitching at her.

Once inside, 'Lady Blu' bumped back down in the chair with no regard for the delicate dress. She quickly reached over to the shelf below the mirror to take a tissue that she proceeded to dab-dab-dab along her brow and upper lip so her carefully-applied makeup wouldn't be ruined too much. "Well, don't just stand there... help me out of this dress," she said sharply. After a few seconds, she remembered to add a hesitant "Mickey," making it sound like a question rather than a command.

'*Better than nothin*',' Mickey thought and bit down the barb she had already selected to shoot off at the singer. "The zipper is on the back, Miss Masterson. You'll need to stand up to get out of it."

"Oh, really? There's nothing that escapes your sharp mind, is there?" Veronica said and got on her feet. Putting her hands on her hips, she turned around and expected Mickey to get on with it.

Mickey did so - grumbling - and quickly pulled the zipper down. A moment or two later, the star was once again standing in her underwear, but this time, Mickey had the white bathrobe ready for her and helped slip it on. "Here, Miss Masterson. According to the schedule, you're not going back on stage until after the intermission for the news at nine so... now we can have the quality time we've all-ways dreamt of," she said, folding down the bathrobe's collar so it wouldn't interfere with the Star's dark locks.

'Lady Blu' spun around and scrunched up her face into a dark mask of resentment. Pinning down Mickey with a blue glare, her nostrils flared, the corners of her mouth twitched and a frown streaked across her smooth forehead. She stood like that for a little while until she did something that startled Mickey even worse than the feral expression - she leaned her head back and let out a loud laugh. Even as the Star sat down, the laughter kept on coming.

'*Oh, gosh golly, she's snapped...*' Mickey thought and inched backwards in case the tall woman was about to go berserk on her.

Instead, Veronica shuffled around on her chair and looked at Mickey in the mirror. "You're quite something, you know that?" she said, propping up her head on her arm.

"Oh, I do. You're not the only one in here with an ego, you know."

"Tell me about it," Veronica said with a new chuckle. "It's actually quite refreshing. Most of the PAs I've ever worked with have tried so hard to kiss my hiney their noses ended up brown."

"Ugh... thanks for that charming image," Mickey said and went over to the bag containing the second costume. She quickly ran her finger down the list of items that made up the costume for 'Lady Blu's second appearance to get a feel for how long it would take to get into - she wondered about a few of the items, but all in all, it didn't look too bad.

"You're welcome," Veronica said quietly. The star fell silent and began to play with a loose thread on the bathrobe's belt. "I'm sorry for acting like a big you-know-what before, Mickey. I always get really nervous during the build-up. Would you believe I almost barfed in the limo on the way here?"

Mickey could hardly believe her ears, but she did her best not to appear too intrigued. She pinned the list of items back onto the second zipped bag and dusted off her hands. She realized Veronica's words needed a reply, so she went over to the free chair and sat down facing the Star. "Really? I wouldn't have thought that from your behavior. Your bitchiness seemed quite natural."

Veronica chuckled darkly and stopped playing with the belt. "Oh, you'd be surprised at how much five years of intensive coaching can shape a woman. In my heart, I'm still a farm girl from Idaho."

"Wow, that must be one hell of a farm..." Mickey said with a cheeky grin.

"Thank you. Unless you just called me a cow...?"

"I didn't."

"Mmmmh?"

"Honest!"

Both women laughed at the silly exchange but soon fell quiet.

A few seconds went by, but then Veronica turned around in her chair and shot her PA an interested gaze. "Tell me, Mickey... how come you have a boy's name?"

"Oh, well, that's a long story. When my Mom was scanned... you know, one of those weird black and white photos of the fetus... the Doc was sure he saw a stem on me. Guess what, he was wrong. My Mom's a traditionalist, though, so when he told her I was a boy, she named me after her brother right there and then."

"But why didn't she change it when you were born... I mean...?"

"Oh, you don't know my Mom," Mickey said with a dark chuckle. "Anyway, I consider myself lucky... the man I was named after could have been called Adelbert or Cornelius... or Bruce... now *that* woulda been too flippin' awkward!"

Veronica laughed heartily and offered her PA a small smack on the arm. Beyond the door, they could hear faint echoes of the signature song of the silver fox crooner whose voice wasn't as strong as it had once been.

"Alberto Torrillano," Veronica said with a sigh. "I can't stand that butt-pinching so-and-so. Would you believe he offered me five thousand dollars to have sex with him last year?"

"He what?!" Mickey said so strongly she nearly fell out of her chair.

"Cross my heart, hope to die. I wanted to give him five thousand kicks in the nuts instead, but my agent said it would kill my career."

"Jesus, Veron- I mean, Miss Masterson... you didn't sleep with him-"

"Of course not! Just the thought of it gives me the creeps. No, I left town for a week instead. When I got back, he'd found a new piece of... hiney to play with."

"What an asshole! Shit, I knew he liked to pinch the girls, but... this? Man, what a dick. You don't read about that in the glitteries! Maybe you should!"

"Yeah, well..."

Grumbling severely, Mickey shuffled around on the hard chair to get back into a comfortable position. "But didn't your husband threaten to clean his clock? I know I would have."

"No, he didn't. I'm a trophy wife so maybe he was flattered," Veronica said calmly, locking eyes with Mickey.

Mickey needed a moment or two to fully digest the meaning of the Star's words, but when she had, her cheeks grew an unhealthy shade of red. "Okay, that just busts my hump in so many ways... it makes me wanna go out there and kick the asses of everyone involved. What a buncha dicks! What the hell?"

"Welcome to the world of glitz, glamour and loveless, make-believe marriages, Mickey."

"You can keep it!" Mickey said and tapped her fingers on the chair's armrest. "But what about the big photoshoot at your mansion the other month that I saw in *Stars Now!* magazine? You and he were arm in arm... and kissing... and—"

"He's an actor, I'm an entertainer. We know how to fake it for the cameras. We each have our own wing of the mansion... separate lives, separate bedrooms, separate everything. And I know for a fact that he's seeing some starlet from the tv show he's working on." Veronica sighed despondently and turned around to face the PA. "And by seeing, I mean that he's screwing her."

"Fer cryin' out loud... what a piece of trash!" Mickey said and slammed her fist down onto the armrest. "Miss Masterson, I sure as hell hope you have a long line of well-hung bad boys lined up to take care of your needs..."

"I don't. If it got out, it would kill my career."

"Oh, for the love of..."

"Are you married?"

"No. Each time I meet a fun girl I really like, I can't get the dreaded words 'mother-in-law' out of my head."

"Oh... I see."

Veronica fell silent and Mickey felt her old defenses start to build. She wanted to give the Star a chance to respond before she'd come out shooting, but the wait had already gone on for longer than she preferred. "Or maybe that's too much information for an Idaho farm girl?" she prodded.

"No, no..." Veronica said and offered Mickey a smile that cleared the air.

The smile held a certain mystique - or even fascination - but Mickey knew better than to get involved with someone from beyond her sphere of interest. *'Uh-oh... rule number one: never, ever get busy with a straight girl. They'll kiss you and then they'll kill you by running back to safe grounds. Of course... maybe not in this particular instance, but... no, Mickey! Just no.'*

Briefly smiling back at the Star, Mickey checked her wristwatch and noted it was time to get ready for Lady Blu's second appearance. "Oh, we better," she said and got up from the chair.

Walking over to the bags with the costumes, she unzipped the second one and looked at the contents. "A penguin tux coat, female cut," she mumbled as she followed the checklist while removing the garments from the bag, "frilly blouse, ivory... high-waisted tights, ivory... white gloves... shoes for tap dancing. Hey, Miss Masterson, you tap dance?"

"No."

"Uh... okay," Mickey said and turned back to the bag. "Hi-gloss black walking cane with a gold knob... and finally a top hat. Oh, I know what this is... I'd say you're to dress up as a Marlene Dietrich clone. The Blue Angel, right?"

"That's right, I am," Veronica said and got up from the chair. "My next song is a medley of swing classics from the 1930s and 1940s. I guess the WCBC producers felt a need to..."

to... hmmm," she continued, searching for the right words when she saw Mickey holding the penguin coat up against her own, much shorter body.

"Is this really a good look for you?" Mickey said, squinting down at herself.

"No."

"Then why in the hell do-"

"It's in my contract. Plain and simple."

"Pardon my French, but this just blows!" Mickey said so strongly she earned herself a hearty chuckle from the star. "But all right. If they want you to be Marlene Dietrich, let's make you the best Marlene Dietrich since the real thing," she continued, putting down the penguin coat and taking the frilly, ivory blouse that needed to go on first.

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After the broadcast had returned from the nine o'clock news and an additional seven-minute ad break, the show was back to full speed with blaring music, performing artists and a cheering audience.

Mickey stood with her foot up on the bottom rung of the staircase leading to the stage, wiggling along to the infectious rhythms and watching - or perhaps even gawking at - 'Lady Blu' who was going through her routines in the swing medley.

The statuesque woman belted out the traditional tunes with great gusto and performed high-kicks with the best of them. The black walking cane was twirled impressively and the top hat was waved, thrown, picked up, put on, taken off and waved again in a never-ending flurry of activity.

The audience seemed to appreciate the effort she brought to the act, because they were clapping rhythmically as the song progressed.

The medley incorporated several of the hits made famous by American female vocal groups in the war years, and Lady Blu sang her way through titles such as *Angel On My Shoulder*, *Counting The Days* and *Walk Proud, Soldier Boys* on her way to the closing bars.

At the end of the ten-minute medley, she went up to the leading edge of the stage where she earned herself another round of thunderous applause. Smiling, waving and blowing kisses left and right, she gave the audience every last bit of what they had come to see - namely her.

She finished off by blowing another kiss to the camera that was right there in front of her - scrutinizing her every move - before she turned around and sashayed off the stage.

When she walked down the short flight of stairs to meet Mickey, the broad smile faded from her face like someone had thrown a switch.

"Oh, that went really well, Miss Masterson!" Mickey said, bobbing her head up and down. "And I'm not just sucking up to you... I really liked it."

"Thanks, Mickey," Veronica said in a tired voice. A wall of heat emanated from her and sweat poured off her brow. Her costume was sticking to her in all the wrong places, and the frilly blouse had acquired a damp shade that ran as a dark band across her chest just below her breasts. "Boy, I really need one of the bottles of São Séb now."

"Uh, sure. Sure," Mickey said, worried what would happen when Veronica would discover it wasn't the right glass. "C'mon, let's go back to number one," she continued, offering her arm in case the Star needed some support.

She did, and the two women soon walked back to the dressing room to cool off before the madness would start again later on.

The white bathrobe quickly took the place of the unloved retro costume, and as Veronica bumped down into the chair in front of the mirror, she reached for the closest bottle of imported mineral water. With no effort at all, she unscrewed the lid and started looking around for the Holmegaard smooth-edged, frosted glass tumbler she had requested.

Behind her, Mickey was chewing vigorously on her cheeks, hoping the inevitable explosion wouldn't be too strong. She eyed the regular, boring old drinking glass that stood a bit further on along the shelf below the mirror, but she couldn't get herself to tell the whole story.

"Mickey, where's, uh... where's the glass I asked for...? The one from Holmegaard Glassworks? A frosted tumbler with a thick, smooth edge?" Veronica said and turned around in her chair.

"Well, uh... uh... uh..." Mickey said, trying to come up with a lie that would stay well within acceptable limits. The confused look in Veronica's blue eyes made her realize that any lie would break those limits, so there wasn't any point to it. "The tumbler got SNAFU'ed, Miss Masterson. It was cracked when we got it. I've taken the liberty to get you a regular glass... it's over there," Mickey said, pointing at the one she had borrowed from the cafeteria.

Veronica followed Mickey's index finger until she landed on the glass. One second later, she turned back to Mickey. "Well, that won't do," she said with more than a hint of her old chill creeping back into her voice.

"That's the best we got!"

"Can't you get me a paper cup instead? I refuse to drink from a regular tumbler."

Though Mickey had heard both sentences, her brain deleted the first part when the second, more arrogant, part rolled around and stole the thunder. "So you refuse to drink from a regular glass, huh?" she said, slamming her hands onto her hips. "Tell me, are you afraid of getting the cooties? No, it's germs, isn't it? Yeah, you showbiz people are mortally afraid of germs from us commoners. Ooooh, germs are sooo scary!"

"No, it's bec-

"Oh, come on... it's the germs, ain't it?"

"No. It's because I'm afraid of cutting my lips on low-grade glass. I was badly hurt by a broken tumbler when I was a little girl and I've been terrified of them ever since."

"Oh... uh... okay," Mickey said with her hands slowly falling off her hips. From one moment to the next, the righteous fire inside her was snuffed out, leaving a faint column of ill-smelling smoke. "Uh... a p- a paper cup?"

"If you have one... please," Veronica said and turned back to the opened bottle of mineral water.

"Uh... I'll see what I can do," Mickey said and left the dressing room in a hurry, mentally slapping herself over the head all the way out the door.

A short while later, peace had been restored in dressing room number one, and the two women were enjoying the rich taste of fresh, sparkling mineral water from the Sébastião spring in central Brazil.

"This is pretty good, actually," Mickey said and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

Veronica nodded and emptied her first cup. "Yes it is. That's why I always ask for it. When you leap from one impersonal dressing room to the next like I have for the past four and a half years, you eventually need something that... well, mmmm... feels like home. You know?"

"Oh, I know."

"You want some more?" Veronica said and took the bottle.

"No thank you, I'm good."

"I'll have some," Veronica said and poured herself a new drink. "So... when you're not sucking up to spoilt superstars like me, what do you do for a living, Mickey?" she continued, offering the woman next to her a little wink.

"Oh, like a hundred thousand other young women in this Godforsaken town, I'm a struggling actress," Mickey said quietly, taking another sip of the cool mineral water. "And by struggling, I mean that I struggle to even get to auditions. I've been plugging away for close to three years now, but I've never gone beyond being a background face. No, that's not true... I did have two lines of dialogue in a schlocky non-union monster movie earlier this year."

"Oh... I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, well, you know. That's how it is. Beyond that, I tend an all-night bar downtown called Duffy's Dipper. That pretty much blows most of the time. Hey, you were in a big-bucks movie of the week on the Women's Lifestyle Channel, weren't you? Uh, what was it called..."

"William's Song. It was a biopic covering William Brougham's years on Broadway... have you heard of Brougham, the famous musical composer?"

"No."

"Oh... I was only in it for a couple of scenes. I had some dialogue and I did a little song and dance."

"Yeah? How was that?"

"To be honest, I didn't like the experience," Veronica said and craned her neck to look at Mickey's wristwatch. "The director and the choreographer made me do a dance routine on a six-by-six foot tabletop, and all I could think of was Don't Fall, Don't Fall, Don't Fall. We did about four takes and I got worse and worse for each take because I just froze solid out of fear of taking a tumble. They eventually gave up on me and spliced together bits and pieces from all the takes, but... eh. I'd like to try again, only a regular role in a regular movie."

"You, me, and half the population of this town, Lady Blu!"

"I suppose. Say, what time is it? My gut is telling me that we need to prepare for the big finale," Veronica said and drained her paper cup.

Mickey looked at her watch and reported back to the star with a nod. "Yeah, we better. What's the finale? More 1930s stuff?" she said as she got up and walked over to the wardrobe rack to open the last of the three zipped bags.

"No, they'll go with a contemporary setup," Veronica said and followed the PA across the dressing room. "It'll be interesting to see if they listened to my complaints... at the dress rehearsal last week, they'd given me a rag that hung on me like a circus tent."

"Well..." Mickey said, pulling out a dress made of blue crushed velvet. Cut like a pant suit with a high collar and very wide legs, it had a million glittery, twinkling stars woven into the fabric - and if that wasn't enough, the plunging neckline seemed to plunge all the way down to the navel. "Ummm... this isn't a circus tent, I know that much..." she said reverently, staring wide-eyed at the outrageous piece of clothing.

"No... wow."

"Uh... wow is the right word to use here, yeah," Mickey said and held the dress up against the Star. "Hmmm. Miss Masterson, speaking as a professional with nearly ten years experience of dressing and undressing people of the female kind, you won't be able to wear a bra under this costume."

"Oh..." Veronica said, instinctively pulling her bathrobe closer.

Mickey's trained eye had been right. Once the dress was zipped and lined up just right to follow all of Veronica's swoops and curves, the plunging neckline created a deep V all the way down to the upper part of her tummy.

"Hmmm," Veronica said, looking at herself in the mirror. She tried to move left and right to see how the glittery stars woven into the fabric reflected the light. That part worked quite well, but it was clear to see from her pensive look she wasn't too sure about the mile-long cleavage.

"Miss Masterson, if I may be so bold," Mickey said, tearing her eyes away from the smooth, fair skin on display, "I think you'll need to powder your, uh... uh... front, there... you know. It's a little shiny."

"Shiny?"

"Yeah. It'll stand out on camera."

"Oh..." Veronica said and tried to close the V-front instead. "No... I... I don't like it. It's far too revealing. I'm s- sorry, Mickey, but... it's just not me."

Mickey furrowed her brow and bit down on her lips. She stole a glance at her wristwatch which told her an ugly tale of not having enough time to source another costume before the backstage manager would summon Lady Blu to the stage. "Okay... don't panic... don't panic... I know how to fix it. Miss Masterson, is there anything else wrong with it apart from showing too much skin?"

"Well, no, but... don't you think that's enough?"

"Yes, but that we can deal with," Mickey said and dove for her vest that she had put on the wardrobe rack when it got too hot to wear it in the dressing room. The years she had spent helping celebrities get into dresses or tuxedos that weren't tailored for them had taught her a thing or two about being prepared for all eventualities, and one of the things she always carried to every job was a pack of safety pins. "Ta-da!" she said, holding up her self-developed Costume First Aid Kit.

"Safety pins?"

"Safety pins... one of the world's greatest inventions..." Mickey said and put a whole row of pins in her mouth to have them within easy range. "Close the V-front until you're comfortable," she mumbled around the metal pins.

"Oh, I see what you're doing, Mickey! Like this?" Veronica said and closed the lowest part of the plunge - all eight inches of it.

"Mmm-hmmm!" Mickey mumbled as she took the first safety pin and went to work attaching it to the inside of the dress. Before long, the hitherto outrageous neckline was prim and proper, and Mickey allowed herself to stand up and admire her work with a huge grin on her face.

"Wow... much better. Much better!" Veronica said as she looked at herself in the mirror. Wordlessly, she spun back around and placed a sloppy, wet kiss right on Mickey's forehead. "Thank you! How can I ever repay you?"

The only reply Mickey could think of was cheesy, but it seemed to suit the occasion so she used it: "Oh, gimme a moment and I'm sure I'll think of something!"

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At the big finale of the WCBC Valentine's Day All-Star Special, the stars and starlets were brought back to the stage to create a proper send-off for the show.

Lady Blu had stayed up there after her last solo act, and she moonlighted as the host's female counterpart during the time where the other performers marched back on stage to a rapturous applause from the audience who had all jumped to their feet.

Her sheer presence - and the brilliant blue dress with the neatly hidden row of safety pins - worked wonders, and as a result, the cameras seemed to be following her a great deal.

Like before, she smiled and blew kisses to the audience while she ran back and forth across the stage to pick up the roses and teddy bears that were thrown to her. Once she had an armful of the furry little critters, she dumped them all in a big pile near the staircase and hurried back to the front of the stage to pick up the next batch.

When all the performers were assembled on the stage, the music swelled one last time and everybody belted out a stirring rendition of *Farewell, Adios, Au Revoir*.

Mickey was waiting just off the stage with all the other personal assistants. Looking brazenly at her friends - who did all they could to avoid eye contact - she could barely hide the devious smirk that graced her lips.

Before the closing song ended, Mickey crept over to Emanuela and leaned in to whisper: "I kinda overheard you earlier tonight when you said to Allie you had started a bet against me."

At first, Emanuela just stared at Mickey with wide open eyes, but she soon shut them and began to shake her head. "Oh shit..." she mumbled, sounding like she meant it.

"Yeah. I think I won that bet, Emanuela. Unless you wanna see a completely different side of me, I suggest you give me the money. What was it, two hundred bucks?"

"Mickey..."

"Emanuela..." Mickey mocked.

Emanuela took a deep breath but ultimately decided against pursuing whatever it was she had planned to say. "All right, all right. I'll collect it and give it to you before we leave."

"Why, thank you my dear," Mickey said and patted Emanuela's back. "Hey... I'm not against a little bit of fun like this... but next time, do it to my face, not behind my back. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Thank you. Did the old guy pinch your butt yet?"

"Four times so far," Emanuela said despondently.

Mickey shook her head and pulled her friend even closer. "If he does it again, just kick him in the cojones."

"I can't do that!" Emanuela squealed, but her cry was drowned out by two large detonations that marked the end of the Valentine Day's event.

The pyrotechnics built into two pillars at either side of the main stage sent two huge clouds of confetti into the air that soon rained down upon the performers and the show's host. While the host ran through a closing spiel to the cameras, the stars and starlets up there laughed out loud and began to play with the colorful pieces of paper.

The music kept playing for a few minutes more, but the lights were soon brought up to full strength which signaled the official end of the broadcast. Along with the host, the artists all came down the staircase and walked off with their personal assistant.

Mickey kept a close eye on the silver fox crooner, and sure enough, he and Emanuela hadn't even made it ten paces away from the staircase before his hand was on her butt.

"One of these days," a female voice growled right next to Mickey's ear, "Alberto's gonna get his own rear end handed to him on a platter..."

Turning around, Mickey wasn't surprised in the least to see the speaker had been Veronica. "Yeah. Oh..." she said when she realized that quite a lot of the exposed, glowing hot skin of the tall woman was covered in multi-colored confetti. She tried to pick off a few of them, but it was no use.

"Forget it... I need to sit down," Veronica said and waited for Mickey to extend her arm like before.

When Mickey did so with a smile, the two women strolled back to dressing room number one for the last time.

Ten minutes later, the second bottle of São Sébastião had been opened and gulped down by a seemingly insatiable Lady Blu. The Star had changed back into the clothes she had worn when she had arrived, but her button-down shirt was opened all the way down to her waist to cool off - though this time, she did wear the skin-colored top underneath.

Mickey felt a pang of melancholy as she organized the three costumes into the appropriate bags. She would never have predicted it, but she had enjoyed herself the entire evening, even during the brief phase where she and the Star were at each other's throats. Turning around, she glanced at Veronica who sat very quietly on the chair with a tired, passive look etched onto her charismatic face.

Sighing, Mickey turned back around and zipped all three costume bags - then she clicked the ball point pen on and put her signature on the paper detailing the costumes.

The order form got a similar treatment, and when she clicked off the pen for the last time and put it into her vest pocket, her job at WCBC's Studio Two was formally over. After putting on her vest, the adrenaline inside her receded and gave way to a leaden tiredness she knew all too well. Sighing again, she turned around and put out her hand.

"Miss Masterson, it was a pleasure to work for you tonight. I hope you've been satisfied with my services. If you have, please mention it to the studio management who will reimburse me accordingly."

It took a while for the tired Veronica to snap back to reality, but when she did, she stood up and took Mickey's hand. After a brief shake, she pulled the personal assistant into a strong hug. "Thank you so much, Mickey. I've had a wonderful evening. I can say without a doubt that you've been the best PA I've ever worked with... even if you did kinda get on my nerves to begin with..."

"Oh, that's what I do best, Miss Masterson," Mickey said and buffed her fingernails on her vest. "If you ever feel like giving your nerves a good workout, simply call Yours Truly and I'll be there in a flash. Mickey Delany, I'm listed in the phonebook under D."

"You know, I just might," Veronica said. She narrowed her eyes and looked like she was ready to say something else, but before she could get to it, a man knocked on the door to the dressing room.

'Your limousine is ready, Miss Masterson,' the driver said strongly to be heard through the closed door.

"Oh, that's my cue," Veronica said and hurriedly buttoned her shirt all the way up before she put on her smoke-tinted glasses and went over to the door. "Maybe we'll run into one another some time. Who knows?"

"Who knows," Mickey said, grinning over the unexpected attention. " 'Bye, Lady Blu. It's certainly been interesting..."

"And that's an understatement!" Veronica said with a strong laugh. Turning around, the Star of Stars opened the door and strode out of the dressing room like an all-conquering queen of the Amazons.

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"Huh..." Mickey said quietly as she restored dressing room number one to its previous state of impersonal emptiness. "It hasn't even been fifteen minutes since she left and I'm kinda missing her already... Gosh golly, don't be an idiot, Mickey... don't crush on straight girls! That's the first rule in the damn book... how many times do I have to tell you? Oh, you fool," she mumbled as she checked that she hadn't left anything behind. When she found the dressing room to be in good order, she clicked off the lights and shut the door.

Outside, Emanuela and Allie were waiting for her with what appeared to be a big bundle of dollar bills.

"Hi, guys!" Mickey said far too cheerily for the occasion. "Oh, are they for me? Awwww, you shouldn't have," she said as she took the money and counted it - two hundred dollars, as promised.

"Mickey," Emanuela tried, but she was still unable to get through to her friend.

Mickey shook her head and pretended she hadn't heard a thing. "Always a pleasure doing business with you, Emanuela," she said and stuffed the dollar bills down her back pocket.

"Mickey, look..." - When her words had no effect, Emanuela put a hand on Mickey's elbow to stop her. "I'm sorry... we're sorry. It was a dumbass thing to do and... I'm really sorry."

Mickey put out her hand, deciding that she had played the big bad wolf for long enough. "I know you are. We're square, Emanuela. Shake it and we're friends again."

Emanuela needed a moment to assure herself that it wasn't a trick, but she eventually shook Mickey's hand.

"Great," Mickey said, waving at Allie who hadn't been part of the bet. "C'mon guys, the pizza's on me. I can already taste Mama Sophia's delish Capricciosa."

The three women were almost at their cars when a white delivery van from a local florist blasted into the parking lot and came to a screeching halt at the rear entrance to Studio Two.

"Look at that," Allie said. "That's what I call bad timing. They locked the door right after we left."

"Yeah. I better go see what he wants," Mickey said and jogged over to the delivery man who had already opened the sliding door on the right-hand side of the van. "Hi. The back door's locked. You'll have to go 'round to the main entrance two blocks over."

"Shit," the delivery man said, holding a huge bouquet of red roses wrapped in white silk paper.

Grinning, Mickey reached for the flowers. "Oh, I can take those," she said, snickering at the man's horrified expression.

"No! They're for... for... uh, a Mickey Delany. Do you know where I can find him?"

Mickey slowly narrowed her eyes until they were merely green slits in the top part of her face. She looked around to make sure she wasn't being filmed for Candid Camera, but didn't see anything untoward anywhere. "Mickey Delany? Who are they from?"

"A... mmmm... Miss Masterson," the florist said, trying to read an intricately printed card that was hanging upside down from the lower part of the bouquet.

"Miss Masterson has sent Mickey Delany a giganto bouquet of red roses?" Mickey croaked, not quite believing her ears - or eyes for that matter.

The florist seemed somewhat less than enchanted with the woman trying to help him. Grunting, he put the bouquet back in the delivery van and held the card right side up so he could read it. "From Veronica Masterson to Mickey Delany, yes."

"That's me!"

"Oh-ho, I don't think so, lady," the florist said and quickly shut the sliding door so the crazy woman wouldn't get any funny ideas.

"B- but it is! That's me! Aw hell... I'll prove it... here!" Mickey said, shoving her driver's license into the disbelieving man's face.

The florist looked at it; then he looked at it again; and then he looked at it one last time. With a strong grunt, he opened the sliding door and took the bouquet. "Here you go, Miss Delany. These are for you," he said in a monotone.

"Gosh golly almighty... thank you," Mickey croaked as she took the flowers and pressed them to her face to take in the incredible scent of the many roses. "And the card?"

"Is attached to the silk paper. Down there," the florist said and pointed at the printed card that was hanging off the wrapping on a bow made of red silk.

"Thank you..."

"You're welcome." - The delivery man's need to get away from the strangeness that hung in the air seemed to be rather urgent. Instead of walking around the front of the white van, he ran, and as soon as he had started it, he took off in a cloud of dust.

A moment later, Allie and Emanuela were at Mickey's side, squealing over the glorious - and undoubtedly expensive - bouquet.

"Oooooh!" Allie said, clapping her hands together. "Our little Mickey's got a secret admirer!"

Mickey shook her head to try to get back to the real world. For the first time in ages, a wonderfully warm wave of crush-induced hormones swept over her heart and soul, and left her a goofy, giddy, quivering mess. "No secret..." she said with a crooked grin, "from Veronica."

"Who?" Allie said, furrowing her brow.

"Lady Blu!" Emanuela chimed in, jumping up and down in the middle of the parking lot. "I don't believe it!"

Mickey was still shaking her head, seemingly in a state of disbelief. "Me neither... no woman has ever given me roses... ever! Ain't they great?" she said reverently.

"Oh, they're more than great... they're fabu-licious!" Emanuela said, thumping Mickey's shoulder. "What does the card say?"

"No idea..."

"Duh, Miss Marshmallow Head, read it!" Emanuela said and tapped her index finger against the printed card.

Mickey just stared dumbly at the white-and-gold card, so Allie took it upon herself to inform her younger, and clearly out-there, friends of what it said. "All right, pay attention now. It says, *'From Veronica Masterson to Mickey Delany. Thank you for a most wonderful evening. If you're interested in working for me as a full-time PA, give me a call at 555-1212. If you're not, I hope we'll meet at the next show.'*"

Emanuela let out a wild squeal, but Mickey simply furrowed her brow and looked at her friends. *'She's offering me a job? As a full-time PA? Whoa... no more Duffy's Dipper? No more humiliating auditions? No more butt-pinching old men? I get to work with Lady Blu full time...? Huh... what if she just wants me for a little experiment? A little carnal entertainment... I mean... that smile she flashed me... me, Mickey D... a toy-boy? Huh... I s'pose could live with that... but... naw, I probably understood it wrong...'*

The senior PA read it again for her own benefit before she looked up and stared into Mickey's puzzled face. "Girl! Call her! Call her at once and say yes! Mickey, this is your big break!"

'Wow, then it's for real...' Mickey thought and shook her head to get the fog out. "Can't. My phone's busted," she mumbled as she sniffed the roses to have something to do.

"Her phone's busted," Allie said to Emanuela and underlined her statement by rolling her eyes. "Use mine, here," she continued, digging into her pocket to find a smartphone that she proceeded to hold up under Mickey's nose.

Mickey just stared at it without knowing what to do. "Oh, guys... do you really think I should? I mean... what if we can't... you know... work together on a daily basis?"

"Duh! Roses! Duh!" Emanuela said, reaching in to thump Mickey again, only this time, it was strong enough to push her back a couple of inches.

"Ouch! Oh... uh... yeah... I s'pose you're right. Uh, I can't hold the flowers and call her at the same time, so... uh... here," Mickey said and carefully handed over the bouquet to Allie who immediately took the opportunity to take a long sniff.

To get some privacy, Mickey walked over to the other side of the parking lot. When she was alone, she took a deep breath, punched in the numbers and held the phone to her ear.

'It's Veronica, go on...' a very familiar, velvety voice said at the other end of the line after a very brief delay.

Mickey hurriedly cleared her throat to get the frogs out, but she couldn't do anything about the smile that had been permanently etched onto her face. "Hi, Miss Masterson, it's Mickey. Thank you so much for the beautiful roses."

'You're welcome, Mickey. I've had the best evening for a very long time, so... have you thought about my offer?'

"I have, yes," Mickey said and put her foot up on a concrete boulder at the base of the mesh fence that lined the parking lot. "It's a very generous offer. It's a huge step for me... but... I accept. I would love to come work for you, Miss Masterson. I'll be on my best behavior-"

'No, just be yourself! Remember what I said about the hiney-kissers... I want you to be your cheeky, short-tempered, scathingly sarcastic, take-no-crap-from-nobody self. You hear me?'

"Yes, ma'am! I can do that!" Mickey said and let out a loud, giddy laugh.

'Good. I'm almost at a charity party where I'm the guest of honor so I can't speak long. I think you should call me again tomorrow at noon or so... we'll hammer out the details then. Okay?'

"Yes, ma'am! And, uh, on a serious note... thank you for your vote of confidence, Miss Masterson. I really appreciate it. I promise I'll work my ass off for you," Mickey said, looking out at the busy street that ran past the parking lot.

'I know you will because you've done nothing but the whole evening. All right, I have to go now... thank you for calling, Mickey. Talk to you tomorrow! Bye-bye!'

"Goodbye, Miss Masterson," Mickey said and closed the call. She kept standing passively at the fence for a few seconds, but then she exploded in a huge, uncontrollable fireball of energy. Cheering and whooping so loudly people on the street stopped to stare at her, she bounced around the parking lot like a manic beach ball for several minutes until she could bounce no more.

Huffing and puffing, she eventually leaned over to put her hands on her knees. "Gawd... this isn't Valentine's Day, this is all my birthdays rolled into one...!" she croaked, shaking her head over and over.

Allie and Emanuela laughed out loud at their friend's boundless energy on their way over to pulling her into a crushing group-hug.

"That's so great, Mickey!" Emanuela said, running her hands up and down Mickey's back. "We're so happy for you... and you thought it would be a shitty evening when you drew the shortest straw, huh? Huh?!"

"Yeah, yeah..."

"I guess all those stories painting Lady Blu as a world class bitch were-"

"Bullshit, nothing less," Mickey said decisively.

Emanuela and Allie smiled and winked at each other. "Now that you've moved up in the world," Allie said as she ran her fingers down Mickey's cheek, "promise us you'll keep in touch."

"Oh, I will, don't you worry 'bout that. Man... this is the best day of my LIIIIIIIFE!" Mickey roared into the air - then she started bouncing around all over again, much to Allie and Emanuela's amusement.

Clapping at Mickey's antics, Emanuela leaned in towards Allie and shot the senior PA a concerned look. "Allie...?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think we'll ever get that pizza? I'm starving..."

"If we're lucky, we'll get it this side of midnight. Look at her, she can't even fit into her car!" Allie said, pointing at Mickey who was jumping around like a big, fluffy bunny-rabbit.

"Good point..."

"WOOOO-HOOOOOOOOO!" Mickey howled, startling a flock of pigeons into taking off from the roof of a nearby building. Just when it seemed she had settled down, she let out another wild whoop and took off all over again...

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THE END.