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OVEREXPOSURE  
A Penny & Indira Story  
by Sam Lewis



*For all the women who love women,  
who deserve a happy ending*



## Chapter 1: Shoot First

INDIRA CLUTCHED HER PHONE tightly in her hand. She tried to resist checking it again as she rode the elevator up to the floor number she'd been given.

Floor 20, still going up.

She looked at her phone—eight thirty in the evening. The Sun had set, the Melbourne nightlife was just beginning, and Indira had a gig. She thought back to the interview she'd had backstage at the Carnival of Queens club, the shock of red hair, the impeccable makeup, the flamboyant clothing, and most of all the restless energy of the burlesque dancer she'd agreed to shoot.

"I dare you to go home and not think about me," the girl's words echoed in her mind.

It had been a good pitch, she had to admit. She'd even waived her retainer fee in the end. Ouch. A few years out of uni and she was still struggling to make ends meet with commissions. A long-term project was exactly what she had been looking for. Was it too good to be true? Maybe. Well, there was still time to regret that decision later. For now, she decided to focus on doing her job.

Floor 30, not there yet.

The building was a bit of a surprise, actually. Based on their conversation, she'd expected something a little more . . . ordinary? Certainly not a brand-new skyscraper in the heart

of the city. Indira started to second-guess herself. Had she been played in the negotiations? How rich was this girl if she could afford to live here of all places?

Indira fussed with her many bags, trying to ignore how uncomfortable and unkempt she looked in the mirrored walls of the elevator. Why did the apartment have to be so high up? She started trying to piece together the puzzle: the messy backstage changing room must have been a deliberately unkempt façade. The girl's constant praise for how professional and prepared Indira had been? Had she been buttering her up? Then there was the apparent ignorance of—okay this was getting ridiculous; no way does a girl spinning on a stool outsmart anyone.

Floor 41. Here it is.

Indira made her way down the corridor until she found the numbered door matching the address she had been given. Deep breath, make sure you've got all your photography gear, and knock.

Easy, right? It's just another gig.

\* \* \*

"It's open!" came a voice from inside.

Indira grabbed the handle, pushed open the door, and stepped into the largest apartment she'd ever seen.



It was . . . too large but gave the impression of being even larger on account of how barren it was. The interior decoration looked like what you'd see in a real estate advertisement: all white walls with inoffensive, minimalistic furnishings. It was designed to impress potential buyers and not much else. It certainly didn't look lived in. And yet, in the middle of it all, there she was.

She was standing on the far side of the room by the floor-to-ceiling windows which, Indira had to admit, provided a stunning view of the city lights. She wore a casual outfit: loose top, jeans, bare feet. Quite a difference from how Indira remembered her. It was nothing fancy, but she wore it like it had been pulled from the pages of a fashion magazine. From behind, the full length of her red hair drew Indira's attention once again. Was it dyed? No, she decided, it was just this side of being perfect.

"Hi," said Indira, breaking the silence. "I like your view."

Penelope O'Ryan spun around and flashed a smile. Her blue eyes caught the light and sparkled. Under the cool room lights her pale skin almost glowed. How did she look even more stunning than that first night at the club?

"Indira, hey," she said, "which room d'you wanna shoot in?"

Straight to business then.

“Uh, I think the living room could work,” said Indira, doing her best to remain composed as she glanced around. “It’s very . . . open. Perfect for a shoot, actually.”

As Indira took a closer look around the room, she noticed that despite first impressions, there were a few personal touches here and there. There was a photo that looked like it might be of Penelope’s parents, bottles of perfume, quite a few pairs of shoes, and some paintings. The paintings . . . well, they stood out. In fact, Indira was surprised they hadn’t been the first thing she saw; Penelope was clearly a woman with unique taste.

“What’s all that you got there?”

Indira was shaken out of her reverie. Penelope was gesturing at all the bags she was holding, a curious look on her face.

“Oh,” Indira glanced briefly at the bags and then started unslinging them from her shoulders, “it’s just my photography gear.”

“I didn’t know there was so much to it,” Penelope mused as she strode across the living room. Indira couldn’t help but take note of how she moved—fluidly, with slow movements but long strides. Here was someone born to model, she thought. A cloud of perfume washed over Indira. It was a gentle yet enticing fragrance, even a bit intimidating.

“There’s more to photography than just having a camera, Penelope.”

“Penny.”

“Huh?”

“Call me Penny.”

That was it, she gave no further explanation. Indira took it in stride and responded with a friendly smile.

“Alright, Penny it is.”

Penelope smiled back at her; it was one of those heart-stopping, contract-weakening smiles she’d deployed so effectively during their negotiations.

“So, what kind of outfit d’you want me to wear for this first shoot?” asked Penelope.

Indira knelt down and started unpacking all her gear. She’d eyed a few spots to use for shooting and had an idea of where she wanted to set things up.

“Well, this first shoot ought to be a sampler for new fans,” she said, “something we can use to give them an idea of what you’re all about. If they’re paying monthly, they want to know the kind of content to expect. I’m thinking we try to triangulate a style that sits somewhere in the middle of . . . well, your brand.”

“Somewhere in the middle?”

Penelope had sat herself down on the arm of the couch while she watched Indira work.

“Yeah, something that’s chic but also a bit provocative. sophisticated and sexy. Some sleek lines and a bit of edge. Do you look good in black?”

Of course she does.

“Of course I do,” said Penelope.

Indira picked up on the defensive tone and smiled to herself. So the girl did have some weak spots after all, she thought. Cute.

“Is that what you think of me?” said Penelope after a short pause. “Am I sophisticated and sexy?”

“I said your brand.”

“My brand should be me. I want this shoot to be honest. Like I said before, the whole project should feel like—”

“Like your fans are getting a backstage pass. Yeah, I remember,” said Indira softly.

“Right.”

Penelope pushed herself off the couch and made her way past Indira towards a dimly lit hallway.

“I’ve got an idea,” she said as she breezed by. “I’ll go grab something from my collection.”

Penelope vanished into the depths of the apartment, leaving Indira to wonder if she’d overstepped.

She tried to shake off the feeling that she might be in over her head and got to work setting up the artificial lighting and other accessories around the living room.

From a smaller bag, she retrieved her laptop—setting it on the lavish stone-topped kitchen island, which bore no evidence of any cooking—and started opening up her usual software.

Finally, she slung her DSLR camera around her neck, selected a lens—something simple and versatile to start with—and affixed it. In a matter of minutes she had transformed Penelope’s model home into a bona fide photo studio.

\* \* \*

It wasn’t long before Penelope returned with an armful of black clothes. She held them up for Indira to see.

“Leather and lace,” she explained. “I got these pants on sale, can you believe it? And this lace top is to die for; it shows plenty of skin, got lots of lovely detail, and check this: a bow. Isn’t that cute? We just gotta decide what bra I’m wearing underneath.”

Penelope tossed a selection of bras out onto the couch. Indira couldn’t help but be a little excited at the prospect of seeing her all dressed up in this outfit.

“It certainly meets the brief,” she muttered as she looked over the selection of underwear Penelope had produced.

“How about this one?” She pointed to a bra decorated with its own lace detailing.

The particulars might get a little lost under the sheer top, but Indira was thinking ahead. A good photoshoot needs a bit of a narrative, and she had something in mind for the finale.

“Good choice,” said Penelope, “I see you’ve got an eye for fashion, too. I’ll just get changed, shall I?”

Indira tried not to let Penelope’s approval of her taste in lingerie throw her off-balance. She stuck firm to her professional demeanour.

“That’d be great,” she said. “I’m just about done setting everything up.”

“Okey-dokey, won’t be a tick,” said Penelope. She grabbed all the clothes and traipsed back to the hallway to get dressed elsewhere in the apartment.

Indira took a deep breath. She found that she was nervous. It made sense; the stakes were high. She’d essentially signed on to be this girl’s personal photographer and social media manager for a few months. If this shoot worked out, they’d be seeing a lot more of each other. There was the financial aspect, too: she’d agreed to work for a percentage of what Penelope made selling subscriptions online, so getting the project off to a good start might help her cover rent for the foreseeable future. Not to mention— Oh, here she is.

\* \* \*

With no fanfare, and no announcement save for the clack of heels on hardwood floor, Penelope emerged from around the corner. The transformation was breathtaking. The leather pants clung tightly to her long legs, exaggerating her

already considerable height. The lace top was loosely tied up with its bow around her neck, adding a touch of whimsy to an otherwise very intense look. The bra that Indira had picked out was clearly visible underneath, delivering a precisely calibrated level of provocative sex appeal to underscore everything else.

“How do I look?”

Penelope’s voice was so soft, despite it all.

“You . . . you look amazing,” said Indira. She couldn’t believe how stunning the dancer’s transformation was, and her voice caught in her throat a little. “The pants really work with your physique, and the top is . . . well, it’s perfect. I think we can get some really interesting shots with this outfit.”

Indira lifted her DSLR with practised ease. “I know you’re a dancer first and this is all new to you, but you’ll come alive in front of this camera, promise.”

A sly smile spread across Penelope’s face. “What’s special about that camera?”

“I’m holding it,” said Indira.

Poppy’s smile split into a grin. “I said I liked your confidence, didn’t I?”

Indira merely gestured to the other side of the room where she’d set up the lighting. Penelope, still smiling, breezed past her and moved into position. Hand on hip, she brushed some hair out of her face.

“How’s this?” she said.

Indira raised her camera and framed Penelope. She studied the screen for a second before looking up at her subject. Her expression was light and friendly, but professional.

“Let’s try to capture a bit of confidence and sensuality, Penny. Loosen up a bit, shake out your nerves. I’m going to take a few test shots now, and I want you to change up your pose with each one, okay?”

Penelope nodded.

Indira subtly shifted around to find the best angle to shoot from, then started taking shots. With every click of the shutter, Penelope tried changing up her posture and expressions. It was a little cute, Indira admitted, but her lack of modelling experience was getting in the way of her usual carefree charisma.

“Don’t put so much thought into it,” Indira encouraged her, “remember that we’re just having fun; there’s no stakes.”

A few more clicks of the shutter and Indira took a moment to check her camera roll on the laptop with a critical eye. It was a little off, she thought; Penelope’s poses were reading too stiff and uncomfortable, obviously artificial. She knew the girl could do better. She just needed to get her to relax a little more.



“Great, great,” she said as she reviewed the photos. “You’re looking fantastic. Hey, you mind if I put some music on?”

Penelope shook her head. “Go for it.”

Indira nodded to herself. First rule of photography: don’t criticise your subject or they’ll only get more anxious.

“What do you usually dance to?”

“Madonna,” said Penelope excitedly.

Indira could hear the smile on the girl’s face as she pulled up a Madonna album and hit play. She spun back around and lifted her camera again.

“Alright, let’s see some of those moves I know you’ve got.”

In truth, Indira had not seen as much of Penelope’s show as she might have liked, but she’d certainly seen enough to know that Penelope probably wasn’t self-conscious about how her body looked.

Sure enough, the music seemed to get Penelope into a better headspace. Her movements were smoother, her smiles were more natural, and that confident sparkle in her eye made its triumphant return. Indira couldn’t help but smile along with her as they started taking more pictures. It really had been that simple.

“You’re really selling it, Penny, this is brilliant stuff,” she said. “Now, let’s see some of that sensuality I was talking about.”

Penelope switched up her style, and the transformation was total and immediate. This was it. This is what Indira had been looking for.

“Beautiful,” she muttered as she continued to snap away.

The way Penelope slightly parted her lips as she slipped effortlessly into a seductive new pose caught Indira off guard momentarily.

“I hope you’re getting my good side,” teased Penelope.

Indira chuckled as she looked down to adjust the settings on her camera. “Don’t worry, Penny,” she said, “you’re looking stunning from every angle. I really don’t think you *have* a bad side.”

She was glad the photoshoot had become a bit more relaxed and the playful banter would hopefully keep Penelope at ease.

She looked up and caught Penelope looking right back at her. She felt a jolt of electricity run through her chest. There was an odd curiosity in Penelope’s expression, something Indira couldn’t quite place. She felt a little flustered.

“Right . . . let’s get a few more like that,” she said as she raised her camera again.

Penelope easily struck another seductive pose, whipping her head around to face the camera. Indira felt the shock run through her again.

“Eyes on the camera, Penny, not me,” she said gently.

Penelope looked away, embarrassed. What had just happened? It had only been for a moment, so it was probably best not to think about it too much.

Indira kept her expression neutral as she tried to get things back on track. She snapped a few more pictures as Penelope started posing again.

“Good, good,” Indira encouraged. Fortunately, the energy in the room hadn’t changed too much and she was still getting good pictures. Great pictures, actually. She looked over the camera at Penelope and considered her next move.

“How about we move to the couch?” she suggested, “develop the story a little.”

“The story?”

“Sure, every shoot has a bit of a narrative to it, just like your dances,” Indira explained.

Penelope grinned. “Oh, I get it!”

She happily bounded over to the couch and flopped down. It was curious watching how her body language changed as she switched from her stage persona to her usual cheery self. Indira privately hoped that she might get Penelope comfortable enough to share some of the silly side of her personality with the camera—it was always good to have something to work towards and look forward to.

Indira set her camera down next to her laptop and paused the music.

“I’m just going to move some of the lights, so make yourself comfortable, okay?”

Penelope poked her head up over the back of the couch.

“You sure you don’t need help?”

“I’m sure,” said Indira, “I only need you to look good.”

\* \* \*

As she started to rearrange her makeshift photo studio around Penelope on the couch, Indira thought about how far she wanted to take the story in the first shoot. As she’d said earlier, she wanted the initial set of pictures to entice fans and give them a taste of what was to come. The pair had already discussed the limits of what they were comfortable shooting, but Indira didn’t want to push too far in their first shoot together. There was a time and a place.

Penelope apparently resented the silence that had set in and started to sing quietly to herself. To Indira’s knowledge she didn’t usually sing as part of her show, but she did have a nice voice.

“Alright,” said Indira as she fixed a new lens to her camera, “I think we’re good to keep shooting.”

Penelope shot up excitedly, almost launching herself off the couch. “Oh, boy!”

“Now, Penny, are you comfortable taking off the top?”

“Sure! I can do that.” With a smile on her face, Penelope didn’t hesitate to start undoing the bow at her neck.

Indira quickly shot out a hand to stop her. “On camera! On camera.”

Penelope let go at once and lifted her hands apologetically. Indira raised her camera and gave a gentle gesture to continue. This time, Penelope went to the bow slower, allowing Indira to capture each movement with a click of the shutter.

Once the bow was loose, Penelope moved to the buttons, undoing them one at a time. She was doing well, remembering to keep her eye on the camera lens and switch up expressions for each shot. Indira was pleased that she seemed comfortable enough now that she didn’t even need the music playing. More than comfortable, actually. Whether intentional or not, Indira noticed that Penelope had added an intimacy in her posing, as if she was asking the viewer to lean in and join her on the couch.

As Penelope experimented with different smiles and slowly let the sheer top fall from her shoulders, Indira realised that this shoot was going to be something special. The first half had set expectations, painting Penelope as a glamorous fashion icon who’d just stepped out of a magazine. Now, those expectations were being subverted by a much more vulnerable and inviting persona. The way Penelope was shyly clutching her arms to her chest only made it more potent.

“Beautiful,” said Indira, breaking the silence. With another click of the camera, she captured Penelope’s response—a small smile, a raised eyebrow, and a slight tilt of the head.

“You having fun?” she asked.

“Yeah,” replied Indira without thinking. She looked up from her camera’s screen to see Penelope looking at her with that odd expression again.

Before Penelope could move, Indira raised the camera to her eye and snapped a picture, capturing the moment. She silently praised herself for having the reflexes to take advantage of the opportunity.

Penelope tossed the top aside and stretched out on the couch. She propped herself up on one elbow and settled into a new expression. It took Indira a moment to realise she was waiting for more photos.

“Are we still shooting?”

“Yeah, sorry, just a moment.”

Indira had chosen the new lens for more closeup pictures, so she wasn’t quite able to get the full length of Penelope lying on the couch into frame. Instead, she moved in to focus on the subtleties of her face and the positioning of her hands. Penelope didn’t seem to mind. In fact, she only appeared to be getting more comfortable as they entered into more personal territory.

Indira stopped to think. She felt like she'd exhausted the possibilities from her current vantage point and looked for an alternative. As if reading her mind, Penelope spoke up.

"Try shooting me from above," she suggested.

"Above?"

"Yeah, like we're getting comfortable on the couch together. That's how the story goes, right?"

Indira nodded, then gingerly climbed onto one end of the couch by Penelope's feet. She steadied herself with one hand on the back, then slowly stood up and aimed the camera. Penelope adopted a new pose, putting her arms above her head and slightly bending one knee.

Indira studied her form for a moment, an expert eye tracing every curve and contour in search of the best framing. She waved her hand slightly to indicate Penelope should shift slightly to one side—which she did, obediently—then held her camera steady to take a shot. Then another.

This was it, Indira thought, this was the conclusion of the photoshoot's narrative. She could feel the gravity of Penelope's charisma pulling her in as she hovered over her.

She knew that Penelope's fans would feel the same pull when they saw the photographs for themselves. Who could feel anything else looking down at this red-haired beauty?

She snapped more pictures, keeping the focus on Penelope's face, on the way her eyes gazed up at her. Indira won-

dered what Penelope herself might be feeling. What well of emotion was she drawing from to get those looks?

“Shall we wrap it there?” Penelope’s quiet voice snapped them both out of the moment.

Indira was surprised. She pushed back some hair that had fallen into her eyes. “How’d you know?”

“You stopped taking pictures.”

Indira looked down at her camera, embarrassed. “Right. Yeah, I think we’re done.”

\* \* \*

Indira climbed back down onto the floor as Penelope sat back up and retrieved her top. All the energy of the photo-shoot began to dissipate and Penelope slipped back into her easy-going attitude. Indira started taking down all the lighting equipment and packing it back into her bags.

“That was heaps of fun, Indira,” said Penelope. “I can’t wait to see the finished pictures.”

“Yeah, that was . . . well, thanks for working with me.”

Indira averted her eyes when she noticed that Penelope hadn’t bothered to button her shirt, leaving it to hang loose on her shoulders.

“Nah, I should be thanking you; it’s my brand we’re building.” Penelope grinned. “Actually, maybe we’re a team? We did agree on a percentage.”



Ah yes, the compromise she had agreed on in place of a retainer fee; Indira would be getting a cut of Penelope's income from subscriptions. Of course, it meant she was now personally invested in the success of her online career.

Indira tucked a heavy bag under her arm and glanced at Penelope again. There were worse people to be invested in, she thought.

"Let's catch up again soon," she said, "I can show you the edited pictures and we can write up your first post together, okay?"

"Sure! You can come over again whenever you want. Just lemme know beforehand."

"It'll take a bit to edit the pictures. What's your schedule like?"

Penelope fell silent for a brief moment while Indira retrieved her laptop and tucked it away in one of her many bags. When she spoke again, her voice was noticeably subdued.

"Oh . . . any time after sunset is fine. I work when it's dark and sleep during the day. Weird, I know, but that's my life." Penelope let out a slightly embarrassed laugh.

"It's just another thing that sets you apart," said Indira as she checked the time on her phone. It was past midnight. "How about a couple of nights from now? That'll give me time to do a proper edit pass on the pictures."

"I'll be here."

“Alright then,” said Indira. She put her phone away and hiked up her many bags onto her shoulders. She glanced around the apartment to see if she had forgotten anything.

Once again she was struck by how bare it was. Some part of her still knew that it didn’t add up. Try as she might, she couldn’t imagine Penelope actually living here.

\* \* \*

As the pair stood by the door about to say their good-byes, Indira noticed that Penelope was standing a bit closer to her than she might have otherwise expected.

“Gee, I’m so excited. I can’t wait for my fans to see the pictures,” she was saying. She bit at her lip thoughtfully. “I guess I’ll have to promote the page on my other socials, right? Otherwise, no one will know about it.”

Indira softened her expression and spoke calmly, “We’ll figure out all the details together. Don’t stress about it.”

During their initial negotiations, Indira had already asked for access to Penelope’s new page, financial transparency, and final say on the posts. At the time it felt like she was being a canny negotiator, but it really just amounted to more responsibilities.

“Gee, you’re so professional,” said Penelope sheepishly. She was still hovering around Indira and the doorway with an unusual energy, as if she wasn’t quite sure how to move.

Indira smiled but looked away for a moment before responding, "Thanks."

Penelope fidgeted with her hands as they stood by the door. Her eyes glanced around the room, avoiding Indira's gaze. It was clear that she was trying to make some sort of decision about what to say or do. Indira felt that she needed to put the girl at ease, so she reached out a hand to touch her on the wrist.

Cold.

She almost pulled away; Penelope's wrist was so strangely cool to the touch. She resisted the impulse to let go.

"Hey," she said, "It's okay to be nervous. Just remember I'm here to help, not make things more complicated."

"Oh, no, it's not that. It's just . . . I'm not sure if I should hug you. I dunno if it's appropriate."

Indira felt another spark in her chest. She tried to ignore it, and released her grip on Penelope's wrist.

". . . Maybe not," she said reluctantly.

"Right," said Penelope. "So, goodnight? I guess."

Indira leaned back against the doorframe. "Goodnight works," she said, smiling at Penelope's charming awkwardness. Maybe she'd get to take pictures of this side of the dancer as well? She could only hope.

"See you, Penny." Indira opened the door and let herself out into the hallway beyond.

"See you."

Indira made her way back to the elevator. It had been a good shoot, she told herself. Well worth the effort. She was even excited to come back and work on the page together—and why not? It was an exciting project and Penelope was an exciting person to work with.

Beautiful, and exciting.

## Chapter 2: Judith

PENELOPE'S HEART SANK as she opened the door to her apartment to find Judith sitting calmly in the middle of her living room. The older woman had her legs crossed and one arm draped over the back of the couch. In her other hand she held a wine glass of something red that would certainly stain the white upholstery should it be spilled. Her fine leather handbag sat neatly on the coffee table.

Penelope shook herself out of her stupor and dropped her keys heavily onto a small table by the door. The sound did not startle Judith. Nor had Penelope's entrance.

Penelope closed the door behind her and stood for a moment in silent contemplation. It had only been a few months but she had already learned to dread these impromptu visits. She believed, however, that she had done nothing wrong and therefore had nothing to hide. She spoke up.

"Judith."

"Penelope, I've been waiting for you."

I'll bet, thought Penelope.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long," she said.

"No longer than you usually do."

She sipped her drink. Penelope hated these conversations. No matter how well an evening's performance at the club

had gone, a talk with Judith always proved to be an effective antidote to her good mood.

“Why’re you here, Judith?”

“Is that how you choose to speak to me?”

Penelope gritted her teeth and chastised herself for the slip up.

“I’m sorry, Judith. What can I do for you?”

Penelope saw the faintest glimmer of a smile on Judith’s face, though the woman did not deign to look at her just yet.

“Really, Penelope, I have no need of your help.”

“You came here for a reason.”

“I think we both know why I’m here.”

Penelope ran a hand through her hair and scratched at the back of her head. “If this is about rent, then you don’t need to worry; I’m working on getting a second income.”

She glanced around the room. As usual, Judith had taken the liberty of *tidying up* the living space. The photo frame was missing from its usual spot and some of her perfume bottles had been swapped for different fragrances. A favourite pair of boots was gone. There was a flash of irritation on Penelope’s face, quickly extinguished lest Judith see it.

“Ah, yes,” said Judith, “I did hear you were working with a photographer on some sort of project. A young girl, as I understand it. Inexperienced.”

“She’s about my age,” said Penelope.

“Like I said.” Judith took another sip of her drink.

She was gorgeous, like one of her beloved paintings had come to life. Dark hair, pale skin. Chiaroscuro—a word half-remembered from art class. Penelope hadn’t been able to resist her when she offered to pay for the trip to Melbourne. Judith was the reason she was able to get the job at the Carnival of Queens but Penelope would have come anyway, just to see Judith. She would have stayed even if the job had fallen through.

“Are you here about the project?”

“Yes, Penelope, I’m here about the project.”

Penelope took off her coat and hung it up by the door. A fleeting look of wariness crossed her face as she bit her lip. Judith was going to ask questions, and she’d have to provide answers. Some answers, at least. She resolved not to share too much.

“We’re doing photoshoots,” she said. “Promotional shoots for the club. Extra advertising. It’ll be good for business.”

She hoped that would be enough. She had Judith’s approval for her dancing at the club, so if she could sell this as a logical extension, then it might take the heat off. She turned away from the coatrack to face Judith fully but found herself immediately disarmed by the woman’s effortless and quiet dignity. She hadn’t moved a muscle.

Penelope found herself walking over to the couch. She sat down next to Judith as usual, hands folded neatly in her lap. They did not look at each other. Penelope felt that if she did, she might not be able to look away again.

“Promotional shoots,” repeated Judith smoothly. “I’m not sure I understand what that means in this context. Can you explain?”

Penelope shifted uncomfortably as she tried to maintain her composure. She kept her hands still and her eyes forward. She could feel the lingering presence of Judith’s arm draped over the couch just behind her shoulders.

“We’re . . . building an online presence,” Penelope said, “to support my brand and bring in new fans.”

Judith leaned forward to place her wine glass on the coffee table. As she did so, her immaculate profile slid into Penelope’s peripheral vision. Up close she looked no less perfect than from afar but not entirely real; she had painted herself with makeup tonight as she always did—with an unerring hand and an eye for immaculate detail.

Her glass secure, she sank back into the cushions.

“That’s not what I asked,” she said, her voice measured and calm. “I want you to explain what you mean by promotional shoots.”

Penelope floundered as she felt her path of retreat being cut off. “Like, fashion shoots. Wearing my costumes, you know?”



“You intend to share these pictures of yourself?”

“Yeah, but not for free. It’s a subscription service, so my fans will hafta pay to see me.” Penelope lowered her gaze to the floor.

“I see,” said Judith.

For a moment, Penelope entertained the idea that this might be the end of her interrogation. It wasn’t. It never was; Judith never gave her an easy way out.

“What kind of pictures do you intend to share with your fans, Penelope?”

Penelope went ice cold. “Glamour shots.”

Silence.

“And risqué shots,” added Penelope in a softer voice.

Judith didn’t move, didn’t say anything. She didn’t need to; the pressure she exuded was already overwhelming. She slowly leaned forward and picked up her glass with graceful precision. Instead of sinking back into the cushions with her drink, she settled into an upright posture.

Penelope nearly panicked. She felt an urge to run or at least throw herself away bodily from the couch. She knew it was futile—Judith was faster and stronger than her—so she threw herself at the mercy of her patron instead and sat stock still.

“Risqué shots,” said Judith coldly. “What does that entail, exactly?”

Penelope was about to answer when Judith turned her head to look at her. The look Judith gave her was like having her heart pierced by a thousand daggers. Her limbs and face tingled then went numb. Her soul was torn apart and mended all at once.

Penelope opened her mouth, gaped, closed it. Opened it again. All her feeble attempts to play dumb fell apart in the fullness of Judith's radiant beauty.

"You know what it entails," she said hoarsely.

"Yes, I do."

There was a long pause, then Judith sighed an unnecessary sigh. With the sound, Penelope felt like her leash had been let out an extra few inches.

"Penelope," she said, "I want to know what's really going on."

Penelope could feel tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. Judith's voice carried with it a heavy sadness and a profound disappointment, seemingly ready to be heaped upon Penelope's shoulders.

"I don't understand why it's so different to what I do at the club," said Penelope, "I'm selling my body either way."

"It's very different, Penelope. Your clientele at the club is curated, and the extent to which they have access to you is tightly controlled."

"Yeah, by you."

“Not just by me. You have your pick at the club, Penelope. I give you a lot of latitude, even if you choose not to acknowledge or appreciate it.”

Penelope started to shake and to wilt. She leaned forward, not able to meet Judith’s eyes for fear of being rendered utterly insubstantial.

“Why’s a subscription any worse?” she managed to say.

“Once those images have been created and shared, you lose control of them, Penelope,” said Judith. “I’ll try to explain: suppose I were to leave you out on the street with nothing but your lingerie, in full view of everyone. No shelter. Can you see how such a thing would be dangerous?”

“It’s not like that,” Penelope objected. “It’s online, I won’t be using my real name. Ind— my photographer says there’s precautions we can take.”

Judith shifted on the couch slightly and closed some of the distance between them. She was undeniable in every respect. “Penelope, I want you to tell me why I should be okay with this.”

Penelope felt like she was gasping for air. The tingling in her face was overwhelming and she felt like the walls were closing in on her, or maybe it was just the edges of her vision going dark.

From where she summoned the strength to speak, she did not know. All she could hope to do now was mollify the

older woman. All thought of hiding anything or holding anything back was gone.

“It won’t affect . . . us, Judith.”

Judith’s eyes narrowed at the mention of their relationship. “I hope that’s true.”

She sighed again and relented, retreating to the comfort of the cushions. Penelope sucked in useless air and tried to still her shaking hands by grabbing her knees.

“You mentioned precautions. Can you explain?” Judith asked. “How do you know they’ll be sufficient?”

“Lots of people . . . do this job,” said Penelope in a halting voice. “There’s ways to be safe. My photographer . . . is a professional; she knows her stuff.”

“Go on.”

“She’s . . . going to make sure there’s no personal information on there. No landmarks, no view out the window. It won’t lead back here.”

“What else?”

“She knows how to . . . strip metadata, manage finances, do promotion.”

“You’re paying her for all this?”

“A percentage.”

“And why is it necessary at all?”

Penelope struggled to organise her thoughts and arrange them into words, sentences.

“For my brand. When I’m on stage, I get my fifteen minutes as Miss Dénouement—more like five—but when the lights go down I’m just me again.”

Judith, in a show of grace, allowed her a moment to breathe and collect herself.

Penelope poured what little energy she had left into that moment and put forth a final appeal. “If I can establish a brand outside the club, I can use it to boost attendance. I’ll . . . I’ll have more resources.”

Judith looked her over with a critical eye. Penelope felt like she was under a microscope, every little movement or noise was being interrogated, identified, catalogued. There was a dreadful silence before Judith spun the liquid in her glass and took yet another sip, apparently satisfied.

“You may have done your due diligence, Penelope.”

“It’ll be okay, Judith.”

“For your sake, I hope so.”

A tender hand fell on Penelope’s back. Soft, comforting, she could feel the stress leaving her body as Judith drew it out of her. The back of a finger gently traced her spine. She closed her eyes.

“You know I’m only worried because I care about you so much, don’t you?”

Penelope nodded.

“Everything else aside, I do care about you, Penelope.”

The hand moved to Penelope's shoulder. A slight pull. The girl fell sideways into Judith's lap.

\* \* \*

Judith was stroking her hair. Softly, lovingly. Penelope was very sensitive about her hair; only Judith was permitted to stroke it like this, no one else.

"You know I'll always be here for you, Penelope."

Her words were as soft as her touch, equally full of love and affection, and they spoke of an absolute truth that Penelope had never been able to deny even in her darkest moments. Judith had always been there since the beginning. In many ways, Judith was the beginning.

Penelope made an indistinct noise of contentment.

Judith used a deathly cold finger to lift a strand of hair that had fallen over Penelope's face. *Cold hands, warm heart*, wasn't that the saying? Not true, of course, but sentimental idioms rarely were.

Penelope reflected on something Judith had once taught her: objective truth, if there is such a thing, is forever beyond our reach. Rather, we turn to art to create our own personal truths. For Judith, that was painting. For Penelope, dancing. These forms permit expression but must never be mistaken for anything other than what they are. Our perceptions of the world are entirely subjective, art is subjective, therefore

our perceptions of art must be doubly so. Even a camera can no more approach the truth of a subject than a painting can.

Penelope found herself breathing calmly. The wisdom of Judith had seeped its way inside her, filling her with a profound calm unlike anything else. Here was a woman who cared for her in every way, she understood and believed that now. In a moment of panic, Penelope had tried to turn away from Judith and hide what she was up to. It was not only futile but short-sighted in the extreme. If she couldn't trust Judith with the particulars of her life, then who?

Indira?

No, she was just a girl. Professional, maybe, but young and inexperienced. She could never truly understand the difficulties Penelope faced. There was no point in explaining. No point at all.

Judith curled a strand of Penelope's red hair around her index finger and examined it with a gentle tug.

"You've been maintaining your coiffure perfectly, Penelope. Just as I asked you."

Penelope smiled. It wasn't often that Judith would compliment her so openly. Sometimes she wished it would happen more often but she always reminded herself that the rarity of these gestures was what made them so precious.

"Let's put aside your project for now and just enjoy each other's company," suggested Judith.

Penelope muttered an affirmative reply. It was all she ever wanted and more than she ever dared ask for; pure and unadulterated affection, a bottomless pit of euphoria. Her cheeks flushed red as a warm feeling spread throughout her body. Judith's lifeblood.

Judith's cold fingers touched and stroked Penelope's cheek, leaving a tingling feeling in their wake. The fingers moved to her upper arm and did the same there. It was as though every point of contact between her and Judith left a lingering impression on her skin, something she couldn't shake off even if she wanted to. She didn't want to, of course, couldn't even imagine wanting to; her soul had been hollowed out and left devoid of anything but utter devotion to this woman.

She imagined herself as a beautiful vase on a mantle—Judith had poured out her filthy contents and replaced them with a pink bouquet: meadowsweet, amaryllis, waxflower, sweet briar, rush. Her mouth curled into a lazy smile.

Judith kept a possessive hand on Penelope's shoulder as she finished her glass and leaned forward to set it down on the coffee table. Penelope was briefly afraid that their moment was over and she might be forced to sit back up, but Judith settled back into the couch without pushing her away. Bliss.

There was a thought, which Penelope briefly entertained, that Judith was comforting her like a mother comforts her



daughter. They didn't have that kind of relationship but it was still nice to imagine that Judith's feelings might be equally as unconditional.

Penelope mouthed silent words.

Slowly, deliberately, Judith tucked some hair behind Penelope's ear and leaned down to plant a kiss on her temple. The brief touch of Judith's lips seared her skin. It was joyous. Penelope could have cried, couldn't hold back a gasp of delight. She choked back tears.

Judith pulled away as her face radiated a heavenly light. Under that light, Penelope blossomed and burned to ashes like a flower falling into the Sun.

This is what she lived for: oases of pure affection from her patron. Nothing else came close, and no one else could make her feel like this. No one was as wise or as kind. No one understood her in the same way. No one ever would. Whatever else Judith had done, she had given Penelope a home, a job, a new life, and fierce love.

During these fleeting moments of intimacy, Penelope could retreat into the sanctuary of Judith's affection and be utterly safe. Here she was cared for and not just tolerated. She believed herself to be a person again, content and at peace. It was here that she belonged.

It wouldn't last, never did, but she didn't care. As long as she had Judith, she couldn't bring herself to care about anything or anyone else. Judith was beautiful, awful, terrible.

Completely in control.

The hand lifted from Penelope's shoulder and all the warmth in the room was drawn away. The moment of connection was severed and a frozen mask of disinterest replaced Judith's face.

It was time to sit back up, so Penelope sat back up.

"Good girl," said Judith.

It wasn't a compliment.

\* \* \*

"I promise that the photoshoots will only help my career and pay for the rent," Penelope was saying. "It won't interfere with us."

Judith sighed and lightly touched a finger to her forehead. "I'm not so sure about that. You're still making choices that involve exposing yourself to strangers, despite the professed expertise of your photographer. I don't want to think about what might happen if one of your fans were to become too interested in you."

"But I—"

"No buts, Penelope. I'm only worried because I care about you so much." She pushed herself up from the couch and took a few paces. "Honestly, you could at least show me a little gratitude, some appreciation for all that I've done for you."

Penelope looked up at her, mouth agape.

“What bothers me is that you didn’t feel comfortable bringing this project to me earlier. I’m especially concerned that you felt it necessary to hide it from me.”

Penelope inched forwards on the couch and summoned the courage to speak up. “Would you have approved it?”

“That’s not the point, Penelope, and you know it. The point is that you lied to me.”

“I didn’t—”

Judith shot her a look which shut her up immediately. “Don’t insult my intelligence, Penelope. A lie by omission is still a lie. Surely you knew that I’d find out.”

Penelope stared resolutely at the floor. “Yes, of course.”

“Of course you did. Yet you did it anyway. Did you think that I might be more willing to grant forgiveness than permission?”

The ferocity in Judith’s voice had reached a crescendo, and for a moment it seemed like she might snap. Penelope winced in anticipation even though nothing came of it. A silence erupted between them.

“I promise it won’t affect us,” said Penelope.

Her voice was low and raspy as she repeated the vow, though she wasn’t entirely sure she could keep it. Judith didn’t look impressed.

“I’m disappointed in you, Penelope, but not surprised . . . I want you to swear to me that you won’t pull another stunt like this.”

Penelope’s heart sank. She thought she’d been able to allay Judith’s concerns earlier and convince her that the photoshoots were a good idea after all. Now, the possibility of the project being cancelled loomed large. She looked up at Judith, who had her arms crossed sternly. Whatever else might happen, she knew she had to own up to what she’d done.

“I swear,” she said.

“What do you swear?”

“I swear I won’t start any new projects without asking you first.”

“Very well.”

Judith lifted one hand to her chin, held it for a long moment. After what seemed like an eternity, she relaxed and rendered her judgement.

“You may proceed with your photography project.”

Penelope could have cried, or laughed, or squealed in joy. Instead, she restrained herself to a tempered smile.

“Thank you, Judith.”

“I expect you to keep me informed of all the details.”

“O-of course!”

“And don’t let this photographer get too close to you. You are aware of the consequences.”

Penelope put her hand on her chest. "It's a promise."

"I don't say this for my sake, Penelope, but for yours. Indeed, there would be consequences for the both of you."

"I understand, Judith."

"I'm not sure that you do but if you keep your distance then you won't need to learn."

A chill ran down her spine but Penelope only nodded.

Judith went to retrieve her handbag from where it sat on the coffee table, a sign that the conversation had run its course. She was leaving.

"I'm sure I've taken too much of your time, Judith," Penelope said politely, "you must be tired."

Judith's rebuke came quickly. "Don't presume to know how I feel, Penelope. It's not that I'm tired; I have other business to attend to."

Her expression softened, or maybe it was just a trick of the light, Penelope wasn't sure. "I hope you'll take what I've said to heart. I do care about you, after all."

She strode across the room, her movements fluid and precise, and stopped by the door. Sensing that her patron might be about to say something more, Penelope stood up from the couch to face her with quiet anticipation.

"You'll tell me what happens during your photoshoots so I can review your progress. I want to know everything."

Penelope nodded again. "Yes, Judith."

"I'll be in touch."

Penelope thought she saw something in the woman's eyes before she opened the door and left the apartment.

What it was, she couldn't say.

## Chapter 3: Page Three

INDIRA WAS BACK with a laptop bag slung under her arm. Inside the bag: a laptop full of cropped and touched up pictures of her model Penelope O’Ryan, that beautiful red-headed burlesque dancer dead set on becoming an online model. It was past eight and the Sun was down, just how they’d planned to meet again when they parted ways two nights ago.

She took another deep breath, knocked on the door again. Second verse.

This time, Penelope opened the door herself. She was dressed even more casually than last time: a grey hoodie, short shorts, and . . . well, that was it. Her hair was done up in a ponytail and she had almost no makeup on. She looked different—younger, more full of energy. She smelled of sweets.

“Indira,” she said with a toothy grin, “I’m so excited for tonight!”

Indira was momentarily caught off-guard by her phrasing. “Oh?” was all she managed to say in response.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to see how the pictures turned out. Oh, and to work on the page together. I made a space for us.”

She stepped aside to let Indira inside and gestured towards the coffee table. It was surrounded by a couch, two

armchairs, and a huge pile of cushions. Everything was exactly as it had been during Indira's first visit—only the cushions were new. Clearly, Penelope had a reductive view of what it meant to *make a space*. The rest of the apartment looked similarly unchanged from the night of their photo-shoot. The same photograph, the same perfumes, the same boots, the same creepy paintings.

"I see that," said Indira.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted one more difference from her last visit: an empty wine glass on the kitchen counter.

"Just chuck your bag wherever," said Penelope as she waved her hand around theatrically. "We can sit at the table together."

Indira nodded. She already knew where all the outlets were in case her battery got low; she'd scoped the place out when she set up all her lights the other night. She crossed the floor, unzipping her laptop bag as she walked.

"Should we order some food?" she asked, "I haven't had dinner yet."

Penelope, who had already rushed ahead of her to flop lazily onto the cushions, looked up at her with an embarrassed expression.

"Oh, I . . . already ate."

"You mind if I order something?"

Penelope shook her head. "No, go ahead."



Indira pulled out her laptop and set it on the coffee table, then settled onto the couch. She shoved away a thought that Penelope was now looking at her from one of the angles she'd used during their photoshoot, and pulled out her phone.

"You want me to order you anything? Snacks?"

Penelope gave another big shake of the head. "No."

"Have you got something to drink? Tea, coffee?"

Penelope lapsed into a thoughtful silence before finally answering, "No, nothing. Just water."

Indira remembered the barren kitchen countertop with its single empty glass. She desperately wanted to open the refrigerator and see what was inside, if anything. She decided to press Penelope just a little.

"No wine?" she said, pointing a finger vaguely in the direction of the kitchen.

"I don't drink wine."

"Okay . . . I'll just order something for myself, then."

"I can pay for it if you like," said Penelope.

Indira's eyes flicked up to see Penelope looking at her from across the table. She was sitting cross-legged on the cushions with a genuine look on her face. She probably felt bad for not being a better host.

Once again, the thought that Penelope didn't actually live in this apartment crept into Indira's mind, where she'd been turning it over for the last two days. It seemed to be the

best explanation for the sparse decor, though she didn't have a clue why Penelope would be keeping it a secret.

She felt awkward ordering food while Penelope watched her eagerly from across the table. She decided to make some light conversation to fill the silence.

"So . . . what do you like to eat, Penny?"

"Oh, people food."

Indira blinked. "People food?"

"Yeah, as opposed to dog food." Penelope suddenly let out a burst of laughter as if she'd just made the funniest joke in the world. She stopped and gave Indira a goofy grin.

"Relax, it's just a joke," she said. "Nah, I'm a bit of a picky eater, actually."

"Oh?"

Penelope shrugged and looked away at nothing in particular. Another awkward silence fell over the pair as Indira submitted her order and put her phone down.

Time to get to work, she thought. She opened her laptop but found that she wasn't going to be able to reach it comfortably from the couch. She was forced to climb down onto the cushions opposite Penelope, who reacted by leaning forward enthusiastically.

"So, can I see the pictures?"

"Yeah, just a second." Indira clicked into the folder containing their first photoshoot and pulled up the first image.

She spun the laptop around. “Here you go, just use the arrows to look through them.”

Penelope eagerly slid the laptop closer and started tapping through the pictures. Every so often, she would stop for a while on a single picture, or tap backwards through the set to look at a previous one. Indira could only watch Penelope’s focused expression over the table as her work was reviewed. She ran a finger along her lips nervously. Too dry, she thought; should have brought lip balm.

She suddenly noticed Penelope looking up at her with a newly minted expression of . . . was that really euphoria?

“Indi,” she said, “these are brilliant.”

Indira felt herself blushing.

“T-thanks,” she said.

“I mean it, you’ve really nailed the vibe I was after.”

Penelope’s eyes dropped back to the laptop screen as she tapped the arrow keys a few times. “I gotta ask, which one is your favourite?”

Indira immediately flashed back to the moment she’d captured that odd expression on Penelope’s face. When was that? That’s right: just after she’d taken her top off, sitting on the couch.

“Uh, I think the one where you’re lounging on the couch,” she said. She spun the laptop around so she could see the screen and scrolled through the images to find the

one she was talking about. It was immediately after the one she actually liked. She pointed at the screen.

“This one. I like how you look relaxed and at ease.”

Penelope eyed her suspiciously. Had she been expecting, perhaps even wanting a different answer?

“What about you? Any favourites now that you’ve seen them all?” said Indira, trying to keep the conversation flowing.

Penelope relaxed and waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, I like them all. How could I not? They’re all of me.” She grinned, then suddenly turned serious again as she studied the picture on the screen.

“So, this is your favourite?”

“Yep,” Indira lied.

“What else about it?”

“I don’t know, I just like the relaxed look you have. People usually tense up when they have to hold a pose like that, but you didn’t. I guess it speaks to your natural charisma.”

Penelope seemed convinced by the explanation and rewarded Indira with a little smile. Heck, Indira almost convinced herself. She turned the laptop towards her and pulled up a blank document.

“So, Penny, have you had much time to think about what you want to write for your first post?”

“Gosh, no, I’m sorry. I was so busy with the club last night and I’ve been zonked out all day.”

Indira knew this would happen. She had a feeling it was going to happen a lot, actually. Penelope didn't seem like the kind of person who could sit still for even fifteen minutes.

"Not to worry, we can figure it out together." She smiled. "We're a team, after all."

\* \* \*

"So," Penelope began, "what do we need to do first? 'Cause I've got my username picked out already. Y'see, at the club I only go by the name Miss Dénouement. I'm thinking I actually want to give myself a bit more of a character and add more personality."

Indira was eyeing Penelope over the top of the laptop as she gesticulated wildly. Her arms danced around in the air as her eyes scanned over an imaginary *mise-en-scène* of her own design.

"Her full name will be Poppo Dénouement d'Croissants. She's funny and sexy all at the same time, a multitalented dancer. In time, I can debut the full character at the club but we can plant the seeds now. The username can be something like Poppo underscore d'Croissants or whatever."

It was extremely clear that Penelope had not done one iota of research on the platform she was signing up for. Indira realised that she'd have to rein Penelope in a little if they were going to make any progress. Gently.

“It sounds like you’ve got a good idea of where you want to take this project,” said Indira. “But there’s still a lot of questions we need to answer first.”

“Right, right, I’m sorry.”

Indira smiled at her. “It’s no trouble. Now, there’s a lot of ways we can deliver content. Selling subscriptions is the most obvious, but there’s also pay-per-view and even custom content if you’re interested.” On her laptop screen, Indira was scrolling through pages of notes she’d already taken at home. “We also need to decide on a schedule. Consistency is key when it comes to schedules, so we need to decide on something that works for both of us.”

She glanced up, saw that Penelope was already fading.

“Uh, I also wanted to check what kind of content you’re comfortable sharing. I know we discussed some possibilities when we first met up, but I wanted to check in and make sure you’re still okay with that sort of thing. I don’t want to pressure you into anything.”

She momentarily took off her glasses to clean the lenses while she let Penelope sit with that thought for a moment. Their initial discussion had been pretty thorough, but Indira felt it only appropriate to revisit the topic after their awkward farewell the other night—better to establish boundaries and consent up front.

“Well . . . what kind of limits does the platform have?” asked Penelope. “Not that I want to go that far, but I wanna have an idea of the space we’re working in.”

Indira nodded, put her glasses back on, and pulled up the site’s terms of service.

“Right, well. Most of the restrictions are things that you’re not likely to want to do anyway: illegal activity, violence, hate, harassment, that sort of thing. They also don’t allow, uh . . . *fluids* is what they say.”

She glanced at Penelope for just a moment, but the dancer seemed unflustered. Indira hoped that this was all getting through to her. She looked back to the laptop screen and scrolled the page down.

“Nudity is okay as long as it’s not in public. That also includes public posts on the site.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Penelope shrugging her shoulders.

“That sounds pretty good,” said Penelope. “My whole glamour model behind-the-scenes shtick is good then? Even if it gets a bit naughty?”

“Seems like it. Mind you, we still want to be cautious about the relationship we’re building with your fans. It’s a tone thing. Like, uh—”

“Managing expectations,” offered Penelope.

“Right.”

Penelope folded her arms on the table and rested her head on them, eyes fixed on Indira. “I do this kind of thing at the club too, y’know. I’m not some dewy-eyed amateur.”

Indira blushed and immediately felt guilty. She reminded herself that when it came to adult content, Penelope had way more experience than she did. She sheltered her gaze within the perimeter of the laptop’s glowing screen.

“Like I said when we met,” continued Penelope, “I’m okay with getting my kit off. More than that; it’s something I wanna do for this project. I do want it to be pretty exclusive, though.”

Penelope pushed herself away from the table and lounged back onto the cushions. She started shifting them around and fluffing them up to make herself more comfortable. “I can have, like, multiple tiers, right? Put spicier pictures in the top ones?”

“Uh, not quite,” Indira said as she started typing some notes. “Some sites do that, but not this one. If you want exclusivity, that’s where the pay-per-view model comes in.”

Penelope’s increasingly animated movements were filling her peripheral vision as she worked. With the cushions taken care of, the redhead had started swaying from side to side with an unaccountable restless energy. Indira tried to ignore it, but Penelope had a captivating, youthful energy about her that was hard to deny.



“You can put exclusive content behind that extra paywall. It’s a great way to add value for dedicated fans without sacrificing your comfort. Does that sound alright, Penny?”

“Yep!” Penelope kicked out a long leg and disturbed the pile of cushions she had just finished arranging, which only prompted her to make further modifications to her roost.

“We should have free posts for ads and stuff, though,” she said as she retrieved the disturbed cushion. “I wanna make sure I can promote the club even if people don’t want to pay right away. I’d like to put teasers in there so people see what they’re missing out on. Is that possible?”

Penelope started drumming on the cushions childishly. Indira liked that she was getting enthusiastic about the nitty gritty details; they were finally on the same page.

“Yeah, no, that makes perfect sense.” Indira pulled up a new document on her laptop. “In fact, I’d recommend starting with free subscriptions to start building your audience. I’ll create a plan for the more exclusive content. Leave the exact pricing to me—I can reference best practices and get back to you on that.”

As Penelope’s playful drumming continued, Indira felt an undeniable affection towards her. Despite the occasional challenges they might face, she realised that she was still excited to work with someone who could so easily become lost in her own creative world.

Penelope leaned forward until she was resting on the coffee table again. “Are you okay shooting nudes?” she asked, suddenly serious.

Indira stumbled in her thoughts for a moment. She tried to recapture that same confidence and professionalism she had brought to their first meeting at the club, where they had first broached this topic.

“Yeah, I’m comfortable with it if you are,” she said at last. “I think we can make some really beautiful art together.”

Penelope rolled her head around on her arms, then smiled and sat back up. “You get it,” she said. “That’s what it’s about. It’s all about art.” She took a cushion and clutched it to her chest. “My body—”

“Is your art, yeah. You told me.”

“And I trust you to take pictures of it.”

Indira felt her cheeks flush with warmth and looked up, but Penelope was gazing elsewhere at nothing in particular.

\* \* \*

It was comforting, Indira thought, that Penelope felt so ready to trust her after such a short time. No, not just comforting but immensely gratifying. Such confidence in her abilities served as a potent reminder that together they had laid the foundation for a solidly successful—and professional—working relationship.

Indira cleared her throat and tried to maintain a steady tone. “I appreciate the faith you’re putting in me, Penny. You’re the first client I’ve worked this closely with.”

She ventured a glance up at Penelope from behind the safety of the top rim of her glasses. The dancer had flopped back onto the cushions and was now idly tapping out an ever-changing rhythm on the surface of the table. Even when sitting still the dancer was compelled to move some part of her, no matter how small. Hers was a body in constant motion, even when she was relaxed. Indira made a mental note to be aware of this during their next photo-shoot—perhaps they could focus on movements rather than poses.

“There’s so much potential here, Penny,” Indira added. “There’s some other steps we need to take, though.”

“Oh?” Penelope hopped up into a kneeling position. “What kind of steps?” Each word was punctuated with a rather childish pat on the cushions beside her.

Indira couldn’t help but smile at Penelope’s endearing behaviour, as silly as it was.

“First, let’s just confirm the kind of content we’ve been talking about. What were you thinking for free content?”

“Advertisements for the club, teaser photos, maybe some light blogging about behind the scenes stuff.” As Penelope named each item, she tapped a thumb to a new finger on her other hand.

“Good. What about pay-per-view?”

“We could do some reasonably priced glamour sets first,” said Penelope, “then we add some lingerie sets later . . . have the occasional implied nudity.”

“Right, and then if you want to include full nudity those would be the highest priced sets?”

Penelope snapped her fingers and pointed across the table. “You got it.”

Indira finished typing up her notes before gently closing the laptop and setting it aside, giving Penelope her full attention. Penelope’s eyes latched onto her, causing her heart to momentarily leap into her throat.

“There’s something else,” she said. “Those other steps: you’ll have to provide some identification to the platform before they’ll let you post any content.”

There was an immediate shift in Penelope’s body language. All of her playful movements came to a crashing halt as her whole body tensed up.

“Penny?”

“It’s fine. Really, it’s no problem,” Penelope said. “I’ll get the documents you need.”

“If you—”

“I said it’s fine, Indira,” she snapped.

As she slowly leaned back into the cushions, Indira saw the obvious discomfort on her face. Her heart went out to the dancer. There was no doubt in her mind now that some-

thing unusual was going on in Penelope's life. As for what it was, well . . . she reminded herself that it wasn't her place to ask. As Penelope trusted her, she would have to trust Penelope in return.

"I'm sorry," said Indira. She leaned back until she found the couch behind her and rested against it.

"Forget about it. I didn't mean to . . . Never mind, I'll find the identity documents you need."

Indira held back another reassuring statement lest she be cut off again. As she let the silence settle in, a troubling thought crossed her mind. She didn't want to believe it was possible, but . . .

"Penny, you are over eighteen, aren't you?"

Penelope looked at her, briefly confused. "Yeah, of course. How else would I work at the club?"

"Sorry, I had to ask."

Penelope continued giving her a funny look until she broke into a grin. "Do I look that young to you?"

Indira tried not to imagine those teeth wearing braces.

"No, definitely not. You look . . ."

"Twenty six."

"I was going to say twenty five."

"Flatterer," said Penelope, laughing.

Indira couldn't help but join in. The cheerful sound eased into a cheerful mood, and they were left smiling at each other in quiet contentment.

"I'm super glad you agreed to work with me," said Penelope, leaning forward to splay her arms out on the table between them. It almost looked like Penelope was reaching out to hold hands.

"I-I'm glad, too."

"That first shoot was fire, Indi. It's proof we work well together." She withdrew her arms and folded them under her chin. "You make me look so pretty."

Indira hesitated. She knew what she wanted to say but didn't know whether she should say it. No, it's fine; they were being friendly again. It'd be rude not to say something.

"That's just how you look," she said.

\* \* \*

Indira had her laptop open again as she wrote down an introductory post as dictated by Penelope. They were still going back and forth on the tone of the writing when Penelope slammed an open palm down on the cushions.

"Your food," she said, "is taking way too long."

It took Indira a second to register what she was talking about. When she did, she suddenly realised how hungry she was. She picked up her phone and checked the time. It was way too late.

"I guess they must be running behind," she muttered as she stood up, "or I missed the notification."

She made her way over to the front door and took a look through the peephole. Nothing. She opened the delivery app on her phone and looked at the order status. Delivered. She let out a loud sigh.

Penelope was also rising from her pile of cushions. "They must have gotten the wrong address. Wouldn't be the first time; lots of deliveries get lost on their way to this place." She swept easily past Indira and leaned up against the wall to look at her. "I swear it's like a black hole."

With no prospect of being filled any time soon, Indira's empty stomach was now threatening to ruin her good mood. On the other hand there was Penelope, a beacon of positivity and good humour.

"I suppose your building has a lot of floors."

"Yes," said Penelope, "and I'm at the very tippy top."

Indira smiled a little. She kept her eyes on her phone, lamenting how much she'd spent on a meal that wasn't ever going to arrive. She'd have to grab something cheap on the way home. In her heart she knew that Penelope's fridge was completely empty and offered no salvation.

"You might have more luck ordering from a different place," suggested Penelope. "You'd have to stick around a while longer, but . . ."

Something told Indira that Penelope wouldn't mind this outcome one bit. More than that, it sounded like an invita-

tion. Her head spun as her thumb hovered over her phone's screen. What was she doing?

Penelope pushed off the wall slightly and leaned over to look at Indira's phone. Seeing nothing noteworthy on the screen, she turned her attention to Indira's flushed face.

"I like your fragrance," she said.

Stay calm, Indira told herself despite the pounding of her heart. Don't overthink this. She's just being nice to comfort you. There's no reason to be nervous or uncomfortable. Still, why had she gone and bought such a fancy new perfume? All delicate, floral, and expensive.

"T-thanks. It's something new I'm trying."

Penelope hummed to herself then gestured to Indira's wrist. "May I?"

There was definitely a nervous spark of electricity in Indira's chest but she was surprised to find that there was no discomfort along with it. Penelope was too friendly and good natured. She offered up her left wrist to the dancer, who reached out to take it.

Up close, the contrast between her own brown skin and Penelope's absurd complexion was even more pronounced. When those pale fingertips met the curve of her wrist, Indira was shocked again by how cold they were. Someone needed to get this girl some fur-lined gloves.

Penelope guided Indira's wrist up to her nose and inhaled. Her eyes fluttered closed as she savoured the scent.



“Very pretty,” she said, her eyes opening again after a second’s contemplation. “It suits you.”

“It’s nothing fancy.”

Penelope shrugged. “Still smells nice.”

There was a long silence between them. Indira withdrew her wrist from its gentle rest atop Penelope’s fingertips and clutched at her phone. Penelope was standing close to her now, almost towering over her. She allowed her eyes to make the long journey up to Penelope’s face. The dancer was so tall—almost six foot, Indira guessed. Tall and thin and prettier than sin. Damn.

“You wanna smell mine?”

Indira swallowed. “Your perfume?”

She could already smell the sugary sweet aroma wafting off Penelope. To be honest, she had been smelling it since she walked in the door and didn’t need a refresher. On the other hand, it’s just smelling perfume. There’s no harm in it.

“I would, actually.” She was surprised at how easily the words tumbled out of her mouth as she reached for Penelope’s arm.

“Not there,” said Penelope. “I wear it on my neck.”

Indira’s stomach twisted into a knot. She lifted her gaze another fraction of a degree and made eye contact with Penelope. Two bright blue irises shone back at her. She searched them for any sign that this wasn’t as serious as she thought, but there was nothing, just a hopeful expression

that invited possibilities that Indira wasn't sure she was ready for. It was obvious what was happening; Penelope was at it again. Indira's gaze fell back down.

"Right," she said, "uh . . ."

How many times could she ignore the signs and pretend Penelope was just being friendly? Stop lying to yourself, she thought, and make a decision—either put your foot down, or take a chance and see what happens. She knew there was only one responsible thing to do, but she didn't want to be responsible right now.

She took a step forward. "Do you mind?" she said.

Penelope shook her head, her ponytail dancing from side to side. Indira closed the distance between them. Any heat from Penelope's body was masked by her own hot flush. She lifted herself onto her toes to make up the height difference. As her own breath caught in her throat, she could see that Penelope was holding hers, too. All the while, that stupid, sickly-sweet scent lured Indira in—

"Sorry," said Penelope, and she quickly stepped aside.

Indira squeezed her eyes shut and fell back onto her heels as she breathed in empty air.

"I shouldn't've done that," continued Penelope, "I crossed a line."

With her eyes still firmly closed, Indira muttered, "It's okay."

Not at all. The rejection stung, it was brutal—Penelope might as well have slapped her in the face and laughed. Indira had summoned the courage to make a move and it'd backfired spectacularly. She wanted to be upset, to cry and to blame Penelope for being cruel to her.

"It's not okay, that was super inappropriate of me," Penelope was saying. "I got caught up in the moment."

Indira opened her eyes to look at Penelope, but the dancer had already moved away and wouldn't meet her gaze. Indira instead tried to come to terms with what she had been about to do. Her mind roiled with feelings of frustration and embarrassment as she gripped her phone tightly and sucked in a ragged breath.

"It's okay, Penny. We both did."

Penelope's cold hands worried at her pale fingers, but she didn't make any reply.

"We've been working together for a few hours and let our guards down a bit. It's not a big deal," Indira added.

It was an empty platitude, but it was all she could muster in the moment. She tried to keep her voice steady. It didn't work.

Penelope glanced up to look at her, and it was Indira's turn to look away. She couldn't face those brilliant blue eyes, not now. A spiteful and petty little part of her wanted to hurt Penelope's feelings too, deny her any further affection

or friendly banter—it was a part of her that she regretted as soon as it came to the fore.

\* \* \*

Indira and Penelope were sitting across from each other. The laptop sat closed between them. Neither one of them could bear to face the other for very long without looking away. Indira's mind swirled with feelings as she tried to sort through what had happened. She knew the worst of her instincts would fade in time and focused on protecting what was in front of her.

"It really is okay," she said at last. "We've become friendly pretty fast. We get along well. We just need to . . . slow down and think things through."

She braved a quick glance at Penelope, who was biting her lip.

"Penny, we need to keep things professional between us. Maybe we didn't make those boundaries clear enough, but I really respect that you kept your head. I think— No, I know that we can make this work."

Even now she still felt the urge to comfort Penelope by holding her hand or even embracing her. She took the urge and buried it somewhere in the back of her mind.

"Can I ask you a question, Penny?"

Indira saw Penelope shift around on the cushions nervously. Neither of them dared to make eye contact.

“Yes,” said Penelope.

“Are you feeling okay?” asked Indira.

That was enough to make Penelope look up.

“What d’you mean?”

“I’m asking if you’re okay. It’s not a trick question.”

“I’m fine.”

Indira almost sighed, held it in.

“About what happened,” she said, “with the perfume. That was just . . . I mean, were you—?”

She stopped short of asking whether it was an innocent gesture on Penelope’s part or if she had meant to go further before getting cold feet. She was almost afraid to know.

Penelope rolled her head around on her shoulders, winced. Eventually she leaned in and rested her arms on the coffee table. She studied the glass surface under her fingertips instead of looking up.

“I have a habit,” she began in a low voice, “of getting flirty. I don’t mean anything by it; it’s just how I am.”

Silence. Then she spoke again.

“I promise I wasn’t making a move. This project is super important to me and I don’t want to ruin it.”

Penelope finally found Indira’s gaze and managed to hold it without either of them glancing away again. Indira pretended she didn’t feel anything.

“Thank you for being honest,” she said. “Our . . . relationship might be a little complicated, but I do want to continue working with you. I meant what I said about creating art with you.”

A little smile flashed across Penelope’s face.

“But we should set some boundaries so we don’t get carried away again.”

“Right,” said Penelope, suddenly serious.

“I’ll always get your consent before I shoot anything,” said Indira. “Make sure you have privacy when you’re changing, that sort of thing. I won’t touch you without asking, and I’ll explain what I’m doing before I do it. Does that make sense?”

Penelope nodded. “Yeah, and I promise I won’t hug you or get too flirty or anything. We’re working together, not hanging out. I gotta remember that.”

Indira offered up a friendly smile. “That’s right.”

“And we should take a few days off,” suggested Penelope, “so we can cool off and come back with a fresh mindset.”

Indira couldn’t help but be a little disappointed, but she nodded anyway.

“No, yeah, that’s reasonable. Right.”

Indira fished her phone out of a pocket and looked at the time.

“Sometimes it’s good to take a step back and reevaluate,” she said absentmindedly, “take stock of the bigger picture.”

“Is that photography advice?” said Penelope with a grin. Indira glanced up, surprised. She hadn’t actually been paying attention to her own words.

“I guess so,” she said. “I didn’t even realise.”

She put her phone away again and reached for her laptop.

“I should be going. It’s late.”

Penelope’s smile faded away as she settled back into her cushions.

\* \* \*

“Sorry your food didn’t arrive,” Penelope was saying.

Indira slung her laptop back over her shoulder. “It’s fine, it’s not your fault.”

“I still feel bad. I can pay for it if you like.”

“It’s fine, really. Don’t worry about it.”

“You must be hungry though.”

Indira patted her pockets to make sure she still had her phone with her. “I’ve got leftovers at home,” she said. “You really don’t need to worry.”

She looked up and cast her gaze around the room, taking in the ambiance of the apartment, complete with Penelope’s fiery locks at centre stage. It still felt empty, the lights were still too cool, and the art on the walls still lacked Penelope’s unique charm. Yet, despite it all, it felt a little more familiar now.

“I’ll call you when I’m ready to meet up again,” said Penelope as they both moved towards the front door.

“Sure. I’ll keep working on the plan for your page. Next time we do a shoot, I can fill you in on the details. It shouldn’t be long before we can start uploading.”

Penelope wrapped her arms around her own shoulders and wiggled a little. “So exciting!”

Indira chuckled. “Goodnight, Penny. I’ll see you next time.”

“Night, Indi. I, uh . . . Thank you for tonight.”

Indira paused with her hand on the doorknob, not sure what to say back. In the end, she said something—almost one word, not quite another.

She felt embarrassed about it later.



## Chapter 4: After Hours

YOU CAME HERE ALONE and didn't know what to expect. The Carnival of Queens was one of Melbourne's hidden gems, you'd been told—a neo-burlesque bar with a diverse lineup of performers and styles, predominantly catering to an audience of young women who longed to see some part of themselves in the confident dancers on stage.

It sounded fun, so you decided to come. You wanted to be more social, more outgoing. You wanted to broaden your horizons and make new friends.

You had enjoyed the show so far, but you were still alone.

You held your overpriced cocktail with both hands and smiled and laughed at all the right moments during the show. You did all this at an empty table.

You wished your friends had been able to come. They had been planning to, but their plans had changed at the last minute and so they had to cancel. You still had a ticket and it wasn't cheap, so you went without them.

You tried not to look at your phone, didn't want to see how early it was. You wanted to stay late to make the trip worthwhile, and every time you looked at your phone you were reminded how little time had passed. The dances were fun, but after each one the clock ground to a halt.

You weren't bored. That wasn't it. You were just lonely.  
Until she stepped onto the stage.

She was radiant. Tall and beautiful, with a brilliant smile and sparkling blue eyes. Her hair flipped around like a flame in the wind. She glowed under the stage lights. The glitter on her skin shimmered like the sequins on her clothes as she danced.

Your throat tightened up as she took those clothes off, one item at a time, and tossed them aside to the beat of the music. You couldn't drag your eyes away from her. There were other dancers on the stage but you didn't look at them.

Your heart raced as the striptease reached its climax. Her body was perfect and you revelled in it. You didn't feel inadequate. Quite the opposite—she was a glorious work of art, and you were privileged to have the opportunity to admire her.

You knew then that you'd come back to this club to see her again. You hadn't yet learned her name, but you would find out. You had to find out.

Every little move of her body was for you and no one else. It was personal. To everyone else she was just one of the several dancers on stage. She stood off to the side and she didn't even get the flashiest moves. It didn't matter; she was the real star, and you were the only one who could see it.

When her eyes first met yours, your heart skipped a beat.

The second time, your breath caught in your throat and you froze solid.

When she looked at you a third time and grinned, you just about died on the spot.

\* \* \*

You never expected what happened next. You thought that you might become obsessed with her for a while, that you would come back to the club for a few weeks just to see her dance. You knew that it wouldn't be anything more than a temporary infatuation with someone unreachable, that it would eventually fade and you would get on with your life.

You were right, but you were wrong.

You saw her when she stepped out onto the main floor wearing a coat over her lingerie and talking to one of the other dancers. You wanted to look but didn't want to stare.

When she waved goodbye to the other dancer and started looking around the room, you looked at your drink.

You didn't see what her face looked like when she spotted you at your lonely table. More's the pity; you would have liked it.

"Is this seat taken?"

You looked up, almost had a panic attack.

You shook your head. "No."

She sat down to your right, put her elbows on the table and her head on her hands. As she cast her gaze in your direction, you felt dizzy and became keenly aware of the drops

of condensation sliding down your glass. A powerful smell of musk, berries, and cotton candy filled your nostrils.

“They call me Miss Dénouement,” she said. “That’s my stage name; you can call me Penny.”

You forced a smile and nodded. Her accent had a strange rhotic quality to it that you couldn’t quite place.

“What’s your name?”

“Uh . . .”

You told her your name. Penny’s hand went immediately to the table—just by your wrist—and she gasped.

“No way! That’s the name of my high school bestie!”

She laughed. “What a coincidence, huh? I move across the country and find another one. I always thought it was a pretty name.”

You didn’t know what was happening or why she was talking to you. This sort of thing never happened to you. You always fantasised that someone would pick you out of a crowd, but now that it was happening . . . Suffice to say that you were out of your depth. Still, you didn’t hate it.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you around before,” Penny was saying. “So, did you enjoy the show?”

You could only nod and mumble a *yes*. It seemed to satisfy her.

“I’m so glad! I’m still learning all the routines. My timing is all over the place right now but I’m always improving.”

“You . . . you were great.”

The little compliment apparently stunned her into silence. When she spoke, her voice was small and sincere.

“Thanks. That . . . means a lot. Y’know, since I moved here I’ve been working so hard on my dancing that I haven’t had time to make friends or anything.” A wistful look came over her. “It’s nice to know it’s not for nothing.”

You didn’t know what to say. Penny looked out at the crowd and sighed. You fully expected her to say a polite but meaningless farewell and be on her way. Instead, she turned to face you and smiled gently. Her hand still rested by your wrist, where her pale skin positively glowed next to yours.

“Why are you on your own?”

The question startled you. From anyone else it might have sounded rude. Not from her.

“My friends cancelled on me,” you said.

She pouted theatrically. “Boo, hiss! Nobody should have to spend an evening alone.” Her eyes flicked up and down as she looked you over. “I like that you still got dressed up, though.”

You flushed red with embarrassment and she giggled.

“Some people like to be alone, though,” she added thoughtfully after her giggles subsided. “D’you want to be alone?”

You hesitated. She was giving you an out. You did consider taking it, briefly.

You shook your head. This made her smile grow broader and warmer. She ran a hand through her long red hair.

"I'm so glad," she said. "I don't want to be alone either."

She turned her attention to the stage as the ambient music faded away and hushed whispers replaced the conversations people had been having.

"This next act is good," she told you, "so watch closely."

Spotlights illuminated the curtains only moments before three beautiful dancers burst through them to begin their routine. The music roared to life and the show began.

It was more comedic than the performance that Penny had been a part of. The crowd laughed at the antics of the dancers as they pretended to struggle with their outfits. When clothes came off, it was only to reveal more layers underneath; burlesque, but with a healthy dose of clowning for good measure.

Penny was delighted; she was enjoying the show as much as anyone in the audience. You found yourself drawn to her reactions more than anything else—the way she giggled, gasped, and whistled her approval as the act drew to a close. It was as if she was seeing it for the first time.

When it was over, Penny turned to you with sparkling eyes and a wide grin.

"Isn't it just hilarious?" she said. "That's what I want to do one day; I'd love to have a solo show that's hilarious and sensual. Who doesn't love a sexy clown, right?"

You couldn't think of anything to say to that. You'd been struggling to find words since she sat down and had just about given up on saying anything altogether.

Luckily for you, Penny appeared to be more than capable of carrying out a one-sided conversation, nor did she seem to mind your terrific lack of repartee.

"I reckon everyone loves a clown," she mused.

None of it felt right at all. You still expected that Penny would grow bored and take her leave at any moment, yet the moment never arrived. She persisted in keeping you company against all reason.

With no performers on stage, she turned her attention back to you. You clutched your cold drink in both hands and avoided looking at her chest; the coat she was wearing wasn't buttoned and occasionally revealed tantalising glimpses of what was underneath when she moved.

"Quiet type, huh?" she said to you.

You nodded in embarrassment, but she only smiled serenely at you.

"That's okay. I wasn't super confident when I first got here, either. Catholic school girl to burlesque dancer, it's quite a transformation, huh?"

You let out a small chuckle. "Yeah, I guess," you said.

She was buoyed by having elicited a reply from you, even if it was a small one.

“Luckily I made lots of friends here at the club,” she went on, “and I have a great patron who takes care of me.”

She looked almost wistful. Then, without warning, she lifted her hand and ran a cool finger along your wrist.

“I remember what it’s like to be lonely,” she said. “When everyone leaves you behind—it sucks. So you make a choice: go home, or put yourself out there and see if anyone bites.”

You watched her hand as it came to rest on your arm.

“You have nice skin,” she said, just quickly enough to interrupt your train of thought.

“T-thanks,” you replied.

It was the first time anyone had ever complimented your skin. You had always been self-conscious about it. In fact, of everything that happened that night, this was one of the things you would remember.

The house lights went down again in anticipation of another performance. Penny’s hand closed gently around your wrist.

“Come on,” she said, “this next act is pretty loud. We should go somewhere a bit quieter.”

Radical new possibilities you’d never considered opened themselves up to you. She hadn’t given you a choice, not really, but you wouldn’t have had the strength to say no to her if she had. You only hesitated when you had to let go of your unfinished drink on the table.



“Don’t worry about it,” she said as she pulled you to your feet. “I’ll fix you something nicer.”

\* \* \*

Miss Dénouement—*Penny*—led you by the hand as she weaved between the crowded tables of the bar and towards a door marked *employees only*. You must have seemed reluctant to cross that particular threshold, because she stopped halfway to look back at you, smile, and give your arm a little tug to keep you moving.

As the house lights dimmed and the music began to thump again—it was loud this time, just as Penny had warned—you were apt to wonder exactly what was going on.

Were you reluctant? Were you scared of her? She was a beautiful woman, tall and slender, who had picked you—of all people—out of a crowd, against all odds and reason. You were a clueless girl on the verge of something you’d never be able to satisfactorily explain.

None of it made any sense. It was all happening too fast. That’s what you told yourself. But, of course, you couldn’t know for sure. This wasn’t exactly your area of expertise, so maybe this was all normal.

The possibility that you might have to tip Penny for what she was doing crossed your mind, but you'd been assured that the Carnival of Queens wasn't that kind of club.

If the other patrons were looking at you as you crossed the floor with her, you didn't notice, not that you could see much in the dim lighting.

There was security at the door, but a little wave from Penny saw them step aside without a word. She shoved the door open and pulled you into another world.

Gone was all the glamour of the main floor. The lighting was even, though not overly bright, and the walls were covered in vintage burlesque posters. The carpeted floor stole away the sound of Penny's heels in its old-fashioned patterns. For some reason, the unattended vacuum cleaner tucked up against a wall was what stood out to you.

"Backstage," was all Penny said to you by way of explanation, a single word casually tossed over her shoulder as you were dragged down the very ordinary looking corridor.

The possibility that this was all some elaborate part of the show, something ordinary patrons might expect to see on a night out, quietly slipped away. Penny was clearly serious about whatever it was she was doing.

You passed two girls in revealing outfits who were casually chatting as they waited to go on stage. With no spotlight on their glittering gowns and only the echoing bass of the music still audible, they seemed as out-of-place as you felt.

They gave you a silent look as you breezed by. You were too busy watching Penny to notice their expressions.

Finally, you came to another door. This time with a silver panel on it with the text *dressing room 1* in plain black lettering.

Penny turned to face you. You blinked, and she interlaced her fingers with yours.

“Do you want to come in with me?”

For the first time, you noticed just how hard your heart was pounding in your chest.

You thought about walking back through the corridor, past that lonely vacuum cleaner, pushing open the *employees only* door, and crossing the floor of the club by yourself to your lonely table and abandoned drink. The idea wasn’t appealing in the slightest.

You looked down at your hand and saw Penny’s painted nails sparkling between your fingertips.

“Okay,” you said.

\* \* \*

The dressing room was smaller than you expected, or perhaps it was just the clutter that made it seem that way; almost every available surface was covered in clothes, handbags, wigs, makeup kits, and other accessories. There was a long makeup station running along one of the walls featur-

ing a series of mirrors, each one surrounded by lightbulbs and with an accompanying stool, something you had only ever seen on television and in movies. On the opposite wall: coat and hat stands, shoe racks, and countless coat hangers on a rail with a range of eye-catching outfits hanging from them. Furthest from you, and seemingly neglected against the far wall, sat an old plush couch.

There was no one in the room besides the two of you.

Penny let go of your hand and made her way over to hang up her tan trench coat. She made no show of taking it off, not that she needed to. Without it, she was exposed, wearing nothing but her black, lacy lingerie. You wanted to look at her and desperately didn't want to be seen looking.

She swept over to what must have been her own station and withdrew a bottle from inside a small backpack sitting on the chair. She gave you a questioning look and shook the bottle as if to tempt you.

"I don't drink," you replied.

She tapped her nose. "Of course, I forgot," she said, then smiled apologetically and slipped the bottle back inside the bag.

She gestured to the old couch. "Go on and take a seat."

You walked the length of the room, taking care not to step on any of the mess, and sat down on the couch. It was a little lower than you expected and you fell a little too hard into its embrace.

You were grateful that Penny didn't immediately sit down next to you. Instead, she sat on her stool and began to swivel back and forth.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

You shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"You've been swept off your feet, huh? Not sure what to think?"

You nodded.

She was quiet for a moment as she studied you.

"Are you scared?"

The question found its mark deep in your heart. She'd read you like an open book.

"A little," you admitted.

"Melancholia," she said. "It's normal to feel that way; there's nothing wrong with you."

Her voice was gentle and reassuring. Although you weren't quite sure what she meant by *Melancholia*, it was just what you needed to hear. You were normal. This was normal.

"Why do you think I invited you here?"

You squirmed in the couch and averted your eyes. You didn't have a good answer for her. You were too insecure to even admit what you wanted, let alone pretend you knew what was going on; you were afraid you'd get it wrong.

"I don't know," is all you said.

She stopped spinning on her stool and stood up. Your stomach tied itself into a knot as she walked over and sat down beside you on the couch. She didn't bother to take things slowly—she let her naked thigh rub against your leg and casually threw her left arm across the back of the couch and behind your shoulders. She rested her piercing blue gaze on the side of your face, and you reciprocated by finding a slip of fabric on the floor to study intently. You felt your cheeks flush red and hot. You were terrified.

“Does this make it any clearer?” she said.

You needed to say something, but what could you say? What if you told her what you thought was happening but had drastically underestimated the situation? She'd probably laugh at your naïveté. A kind laugh, not rude at all, but still humiliating. Even worse—you might have overestimated.

In the end, you could only nod and mutter an affirmation. You felt sick. After coming this far, you thought for sure that she'd realise your conversational repertoire could be convincingly reproduced by a paper fortune teller and send you on your way.

She did no such thing. Cruelly, she seemed to enjoy watching your timid behaviour and merely smiled at you.

“Sweetie,” she said, “you can relax.”

And, surprisingly, you found that you could. You were breathing again, and your heart rate, though still elevated, was no longer in danger of putting you in hospital.

“Penny,” you said, “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

She did laugh at that, but you didn’t feel bad after all.

“Girl, nobody knows what they’re doing. That’s what makes it fun! Sure, it’s scary too, but there’s such a thing as playing it too safe, y’know?”

“I guess. I just . . . I’m not sure about this.”

She pressed on despite your uncertainty, apparently emboldened by extracting an entire sentence out of you.

“First time with another girl?”

Was it possible for you to blush any further?

She placed her hand on top of yours. “Remember the kind of school I went to? Believe me, I get it.”

The cool touch of her hand unsettled you a little, and you decided to ask the question that had been on your mind since the beginning, the root of all your misgivings.

“Why me?”

Penny almost seemed taken aback. “It’s ‘cause I think you’re cute, y’dork. You’re just . . . you stand out. Okay, maybe you’re quiet, but so what? Nobody’s perfect.” She squeezed your hand. “That, and I saw the way you were looking at me during the show.”

You wanted to look at her now. You wanted to see what she looked like up close. There was no reason why you couldn’t and every reason why you should, but you were still afraid to turn your head.

“Everyone else was watching the dance, but you were watching me,” she said. “Maybe s’not the same for you, but I’m weak to being wanted.”

It was, in fact, the same for you. She knew that, of course; it was why you were here. She must be teasing—

“Hey,” Penny’s voice cut through your thoughts, “look at me.”

You forced yourself to lift your head and look at her. This close, you could see all her imperfections: her freckles hidden under an uneven layer of foundation, her eyeliner disguising her slightly asymmetrical eyelids, the stray hairs escaping the braids of her faux undercut to tickle her small ears . . . She was real—a real woman, not a work of art, and she was beautiful.

The two of you got lost in the moment, and every now and then your wandering eyes met hers. She didn’t mind that you couldn’t maintain eye contact for long; it was enough that you didn’t turn away.

She lifted your hand and placed it lightly on her own shoulder. Her bare skin was cool and smooth under your fingers.

“There, isn’t that better?” she said.

You felt a little dizzy. You’d never done anything like this before. Especially not with another woman.

“What if someone comes in?”



“They won’t,” she said, “and even if they did, so what? I’m allowed to have friends back here.”

Her casual dismissal didn’t do much to put your mind at ease. What’s more, you were paying close enough attention to note her use of the plural *friends*, which only raised further questions.

“Sweetie,” she continued, “we’ve got time. Let’s just focus on having fun, yeah?”

She was right, you were just looking for reasons to be nervous. An instinct that came all too easily.

“C’mere.”

She gently took hold of your shoulder and turned you until you were both facing each other. You lifted your hand from her shoulder without thinking, but she quickly pulled it back into place once you were both settled.

She searched your eyes again as her own hand fell lightly onto your leg.

“You’re shaking,” she said, “are you cold?”

“No . . .”

She gave your thigh a comforting squeeze. “You’re still frightened, aren’t you?”

You nodded.

“Do you want to kiss me?” she asked.

“I-I don’t know . . .”

Your answer actually caught her off-guard. Her affectionate expression faltered for just a fraction of a second before she recovered and changed tack.

“What if I kissed you? Would you be alright with that?”

You opened your mouth to answer, but nothing came out. You honestly weren’t sure how you felt.

She lifted her left hand off the couch and traced her fingertips along the curve of your ear. You closed your eyes.

“Maybe,” you said.

With that, the light touch of her fingertips gave way to the cold embrace of her palm as she cupped your cheek and leaned in. Your heart leapt into your throat as your anticipation and terror rose in equal measure. She stopped only millimetres away.

“I need you to invite me,” she whispered, her breath falling onto your lips.

You let out a shaky breath, then spoke, “Yes.”

It was enough. She closed the distance between you and pressed her lips against yours. It felt strange, unnatural. For a moment you even wondered if she’d kissed you at all. Your eyes were closed, after all.

Then, she opened her mouth and you opened yours in turn. Her hands tightened around your jaw and around your thigh with a sudden, furious strength. Her teeth found their mark inside your bottom lip.

It hurt, but only for a moment.

You were awash with pleasurable sensations beyond your every reckoning.

Awareness of your surroundings came in fits and starts, a staccato rush of colours absent shapes and shapes absent colours, as if your senses were being picked apart, coming unravelled, and being devoured. Time and space ran against one another. Light and dark were just ideas that no longer described anything real. The only thing you were sure of was Penny's undeniable presence—her touch, her smell, the electric sensation of her skin against yours.

You inhaled sharply and deeply. The more your lungs filled with sweet-smelling air, the more you were sure you were going to suffocate. When you were finally forced to exhale, it felt like all your anxieties and fears were drained out of your body along with the spent air. A rush of warmth and numbness ran down your spine and throughout your limbs, and you briefly felt like you were floating.

You did not think. When a word did pass through what was left of your consciousness it was ephemeral, couldn't connect to anything else, and was soon forgotten.

It was all forgotten in the end. Nothing of what you experienced was retained. The hole in your memory was filled only with a firm conviction that something transcendent and transformational had happened to you.

Penny's face swam in your vision. She was so beautiful that you nearly cried. You might have done so. The satisfaction of being with her was still not enough, would never be enough. You were insatiable. You needed her.

\* \* \*

When you came to, groggy and confused, she was still there watching over you and stroking your hair.

You realised that your head was resting on her lap.

"Hey, sleepyhead," she said as you stirred.

She helped you lift yourself upright and steadied you with a hand on your shoulder.

"How're you feeling?"

You tried to speak but didn't recognise any of the words that came out of your mouth. She nodded serenely as if she understood.

"You're fine, sweetie."

You did feel okay, even if you weren't sure what was happening. It was just nice to be around her. You looked around the room; you were still backstage in the dressing room. A half-drunk bottle of something was visible near her bag. She followed your eyes.

"You might have had a little too much to drink," she said.

You thought that made sense.

"Penny . . . ?"

You did it, you spoke a sensible word. Next, you tried standing. She quickly moved to help you up and put your hand on her shoulder so you could keep your balance.

You took a deep breath. You were dizzy, but you didn't fall over.

Penny's face swung into view.

"We had fun, didn't we?"

You tossed your head forward in a rough approximation of a nod. She smiled at you.

"I hope you come back to the Carnival sometime," she said. "Maybe you'll become a regular? Wouldn't that be nice?"

You looked at her and couldn't help but smile back. She was still so beautiful. Even your hazy state of mind couldn't diminish her in any way.

She took you over to her makeup station and withdrew a red lip liner pencil from her handbag. When she turned back to face you, she removed the cap and pressed the tip gently to her bottom lip. Her smile widened into a grin.

"If you want to see me again," she said softly, then lifted the pencil from her mouth and gestured towards your right arm.

You weren't sure what she was getting at—you were still disoriented and lightheaded—but you offered up your arm without any question or hesitation.

She kept smiling as she took it gently in her hands, slid back your sleeve, and wrote Judith's number on your wrist.

## Chapter 5: Bedroom Eyes

PENELOPE LAY AWAKE in her bed, eyes red. She had been crying again. She let the tears roll off her cheeks and stain the pillowcase. It was always the same story, always the same ending. She decided that she was always going to feel bad at the end of those nights, one way or the other. Either Judith would be there, or her reflection would.

There was a knock at the door. Penelope was slow to respond, until she remembered that Judith never knocked. Indira! Damn, she had forgotten that they'd agreed to a second shoot at the apartment tonight.

She shot upright, saw the blood on the pillow and turned it over—no time to change it—wiped her mouth, rolled out of bed and nearly fell over. Her lingerie from last night was still lying on the floor. She shoved it under the bed where it wouldn't be seen.

Another knock.

Penelope rummaged through her clothes to find something to wear. She grabbed a loose shirt and shorts, grimaced as she threw them on; she'd agreed to maintain a professional demeanour this time and was already falling short. Her hair was a mess. She'd have to brush it on the move.

Penelope realised that she was actually excited. When had she started feeling that way? It was the same excitement she felt before going out on stage. She didn't want to keep Indi-

ra waiting at the door. She was an audience of just one, but an audience nonetheless, one she didn't want to disappoint.

More knocking, a little louder this time.

Penelope tried to respond but her throat was raw and no sound came out. She grabbed a hairbrush and stumbled into the hallway, almost tripping over herself in a rush to get to the door.

When she finally opened it, Indira was there, hand still raised as if she was about to knock again. Penelope relaxed, put on a sheepish grin, and tried to brush her waves out.

"Sorry, I overslept," she said.

"I can see that."

Indira looked the same as she always did—messy bun, jeans, slim top, those adorable thick-rimmed glasses that Penelope wanted to pluck off and hold above her head. She had her camera with her, but wasn't carrying all the heavy bags she had with her during their first shoot.

She looked Penelope over. "So, this is professional, huh?" she said, still hovering outside the door.

The sarcasm in Indira's voice was a surprise, but more surprising was that it wasn't unpleasant. It was actually comforting in a weird way, Penelope thought. The tone of disappointment made her want to try harder.

"I can come back another time," Indira added.



Penelope waved a hand quickly. “No, no, come in,” she said, stepping back from the doorway. “I clean up quick, don’t worry.”

Indira gave her a suspicious look, but did step inside with a deep sigh. “Alright, let’s get to work then. I want to try shooting natural light tonight.”

Penelope hurriedly worked out the remaining kinks in her hair. “Right, natural light. I totally know what that means, but if you had to get specific . . .”

“Just the apartment lights, maybe the glow of the TV,” said Indira as she pulled out her camera and slung it around her neck. “It’ll be more challenging, but we might be able to get some interesting shots. Dreamier, more ethereal.”

The idea tickled Penelope. “We don’t have to use the living room,” she said enthusiastically.

“Oh, you have a spare room? That’d be useful, actually.”

“I was thinking of the bedroom.” Penelope caught the narrowing of Indira’s eye before glancing away. “I—I mean, if you want. There’s lamps, and the bed, and . . . y’know.”

“Right,” said Indira, “a bedroom photoshoot makes sense for what you were thinking, doesn’t it? That behind-the-scenes feeling.”

Penelope felt unsure of herself in the silence that followed. Had she pushed too far?

“We don’t have to.”

“No, Penny, it’s fine. A change of scenery is what we need for this shoot, actually.”

Penelope lit up and scurried into the hallway ahead of Indira, her bare feet padding on the hardwood floors.

“It’s this way,” she said.

Indira had lowered her head as Penelope swept past her, and was still pointedly keeping her gaze averted as she followed at a distance. Penelope thought she might have spotted a slight flush on Indira’s cheeks, but it was admittedly difficult to tell with her darker complexion. Even so, she suppressed a smile as she bounded into her bedroom and flicked on the light.

\* \* \*

Penelope had already started making the bed, eager to avoid any scenario in which Indira might discover the soiled pillow or clothes.

“Wha—?”

Penelope looked up from tucking in the corners of her bedsheets to see Indira standing in the doorway, eyes and mouth agape.

“What is it?” she asked, suddenly afraid that she’d missed something terrifically obvious in her hurry to put the bed in order. A bloodstained bra out in the open would be just the thing to bring the evening to a screeching halt.

“It’s just . . . different.”

“Different?” Penelope looked around, trying to understand what in the room had caught Indira’s attention.

The thick blankets draped over her bed were still in a state of disarray, but not dirty. Some of her plush animal toys had fallen onto the shag rug when she’d woken up, but the many clean and fluffy pillows at the head of her bed were still piled up where they belonged, with the stained case neatly turned over and hidden from view. Her wardrobe stood open, revealing the full-length mirror inside the door surrounded by LED fairy lights, but that was just her makeshift fashion station. Nothing stood out to her as unusual. It was warm, inviting, lived in. Her sanctuary.

“It’s nothing like your living room, Penny.”

Indira’s body language had changed considerably from only a minute ago. She was more relaxed and *loose*, for want of a better word. Penelope found her own mood brightening as well as her mind began to race with new possibilities. She wondered—not for the first time—what she might get away with.

“Maybe I feel more alive in this room,” she mused.

Indira crossed the room and peered through the blinds that hung in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows like thick black prison bars. She parted them gently with the back of her hand.

“They’re for privacy,” said Penelope. “There’s some real stickybeaks in my line of work.”

Indira glanced back at her. “I’ve been thinking about that; I’ll be shooting with a shallow depth of field,” she said. “So no risk of anyone tracking down your apartment by looking at what’s behind you.”

“I . . . definitely understand what that means and I appreciate it.” Penelope wandered over to her bedside table to turn on her lamp and fetch some makeup. She swung the mirrored wardrobe door wide open so she could put on her face while watching Indira, who was now stepping back from the window to frame various imaginary photos with her hands.

“I think it’ll make a good backdrop, actually,” Indira was saying. “The only thing that’d make it better would be some rain on the glass.”

“Come over next time there’s a shower. We’ll have a cozy night in.” Penelope applied her lipstick in three short, smooth strokes and smacked her lips.

“Don’t joke.”

Penelope felt the sharp rebuke in Indira’s voice and withdrew her next witticism accordingly. She was about to put on some perfume when she sniffed at her armpit and recoiled slightly from the heady mixture of last night’s misadventure—best not to add a new fragrance to the bouquet she had already cultivated.

In the mirror, she could see Indira adjusting the settings on her camera.

“Can we have the overhead off?” she asked.

“Mmm?”

“The ceiling light. I want to try with just the bedside lamp.”

Penelope was only too happy to oblige. She skipped over to the door and flicked off the light, plunging the room into a dreamlike ambiance that perfectly matched the mood she was anticipating.

“So,” she said, tapping her fingers on the doorframe behind her, “what should I wear tonight? For the photoshoot, I mean.”

“I was thinking: something more casual, an outfit that’ll pair well with your natural looks and not overpower them.” She was still surveying the room, apparently judging how much light she was getting from different angles. “Do you have anything like a short dress, or maybe just jeans and a nice shirt?”

Penelope spun around in the clothes she was already wearing. “What about a baggy tee and short shorts? The kind of outfit that says—in a breathy voice—*why not grab a coffee and stay the night?*”

“Right, because that’s what we need right now,” said Indira under her breath, not even looking back. “Maybe for another shoot, you know?”

Penelope felt her heart come alive in her chest as Indira dismissed her suggestion, and she lapsed into silence. There was something about being chided that gave her a strange little thrill. She didn't know what to do with the feeling just yet, so she put it aside as she turned to search through her wardrobe. She hoped the darkness would hide the flush in her cheeks.

When she finally emerged from the depths of her wardrobe, she was holding a pair of jeans and a neat button-up blouse. She held them up for Indira's inspection.

"Will this do?" she asked.

Indira made her way over to inspect the clothes. She checked the colour and texture and took note of how they looked in the dim light of the lamp.

"I like the tortoise shell buttons," she murmured. "How's the fit?" She reached out to take the blouse from Penelope, but caught herself and hastily withdrew her hand with an apologetic gesture.

"I'll, uh . . . let you get changed. Just call out when you're ready."

And with nothing more than that, Indira was gone. Her departure was punctuated by the click of the door closing behind her as she left Penelope alone in the bedroom.

Penelope looked down at the clothes in her hands and thought about how close Indira had been to touching her. It was good that she stopped; Penelope would never have to

worry about the guilt of going too far. She closed her eyes, squeezed her fist around the fabric, and threw her head back.

“Keep me honest, Indi,” she whispered to the ceiling.

\* \* \*

When she had finished dressing, Penelope opened the door to find Indira leaning against the wall outside. Her eyes flicked up to Penelope’s face, then down to her clothing to take it all in.

“Well,” said Penelope, “how do I look?”

She stepped back into the room and spun slowly to show off her outfit. Indira took the unspoken invitation and followed her inside. She crossed her arms under the camera hanging from her neck and tilted her head.

“It’s definitely a good look. Only . . .” Indira lifted one arm, pinched her thumb and index fingers together, and wiggled her hand at her neck. “Could you make it a little more casual?”

Penelope pretended not to understand what she was being instructed to do, and merely mirrored the position of Indira’s hand while wearing a confused look on her face. She only relented when it became clear—after an exasperated sigh and clarifying gesture—that her photographer was not

going to step forward and undo the top button of her blouse.

“Where do you want me?” said Penelope as she finally undid the button herself.

“By the window, thanks . . . Yes, that’s it, touching the glass. I’d like to get the city lights in the background.”

Penelope was hesitant to open the blinds too far. “Are you sure nobody will know which floor I’m on?”

“They won’t even know which building, I promise. The background will be completely out of focus. Now, let’s do a few warm up poses.” Indira finally raised her camera to frame the first pictures of their shoot.

Penelope settled into a pose in front of the blinds, head turned to look out at the city—Melbourne, her home of the last several months. She still remembered how she’d felt arriving at the airport, heart pounding in her chest like all the girls who move to the big city to become stars. She’d ignored all the warning signs because of course she had, but against Judith she never stood a chance. Her life had become an exercise in fear.

Penelope lifted a hand to touch the glass with the back of her finger. She expected to feel the chill of the cold night air on the glass, but there was nothing at all.

Click. The sound of a camera’s shutter.

Yes, Indira. She was not afraid of her. All of Penelope’s regrets now fashioned themselves into a singular desire to



hold onto this precious new connection. Judith would not have her.

A flash of motion snapped Penelope out of her day-dreaming. She spun around to see Indira's camera swinging loosely from her neck as she fumbled to grab a hold of it. It took a moment to register what had happened.

"Indi? D'you drop your camera?"

"No, it's fine," she said hastily, then corrected herself. "I mean, yes, but that's what the strap is for. No harm done."

She lifted the camera back up and aimed the lens. "We can keep shooting, just start posing again."

Penelope's eyebrows twitched, but despite how out-of-character Indira was acting, she returned to her contemplative pose by the window without making any fuss. She massaged her expression back into one of contemplation and listened for the click of the shutter.

It came, but slower than expected.

Penelope immediately adjusted her posture and waited for the camera. Once again, there was a small delay before Indira snapped the picture. Something was off; Penelope could feel Indira's hesitation every time a new pose was struck. Her movements were effortless, conveying the precise level of vulnerability and openness she needed to make her fans blush. Indira, on the other hand, was distracted—a fraction of a second slower than usual.

Penelope saw an opportunity. She spun around to plant her back against the window and face her photographer directly. She moved her hand to the buttons of her blouse and held them there wordlessly as she cocked her head. She could see Indira's eyes following the movement of her fingers and relished the absolute control she had over the girl's attention.

Indira's low voice broke the silence, "Yeah." She gave a nod and fumbled to bring the camera into focus.

Penelope suppressed a smile and undid one of the buttons on her blouse. Indira snapped the shutter just as soon as she had framed the action. Penelope then moved her hands to draw the lens further down her body. She made sure to slip into a distinct pose after each button was undone as the two women quickly fell into a silent rhythm, Indira's camera clicking away as Penelope's blouse was steadily drawn open.

As surely as Penelope had wanted it, the blouse was undone completely. Her bare skin glowed in the lamp light as she raised her hands above and behind her head. Indira hesitated again, her finger hovering over the shutter button.

Penelope's moves were calculated; she knew what would make a good shot, how the movement of her arms would part the fabric of her blouse and bare her stomach—which would reveal that she hadn't bothered to put on a bra—and

just how much her little smirk would drive her audience wild with anticipation for what was about to come.

She held the pose and silently dared Indira not to take the shot. *You can tell me it's too much*, she thought. They could argue about how soon was too soon and whether they should work up to things instead, but Penelope knew she hadn't crossed the line yet—she'd only walked up to it and planted a toe.

Indira took the shot.

Penelope slipped into a new pose; lips parted, eyelids half closed, head falling back and to the side as she plunged her hands into her hot mess of hair. The camera shutter fired again and again to capture each movement of her fingers.

Penelope maintained a steady gaze on the camera lens, acutely aware of the person behind it. The line between the viewer and the viewfinder was already dangerously thin and she delighted in the opportunity to test its limits. She could pull the camera's focus wherever she wanted, reveal whatever she liked, and Indira would see what the camera saw as if it was meant for her and her alone.

Penelope dropped her hand to her waistband and grasped the button on her jeans. Indira followed the movement with her camera instinctively before realising what was about to happen. Penelope held still as she watched for any sign of discomfort or fear from her partner. There was none.

She tilted her head in a silent question and waited patiently for Indira's reply. It came, eventually, in the form of a small nod. Small enough that Penelope wasn't totally sure it had even happened. Fortunately, Indira steadied her camera and adjusted her stance in a clear sign that she was ready. Penelope felt her heart flutter. It came as a surprise; typically, only Judith could elicit that reaction.

Penelope silently undid the button on her jeans and parted the waistband. She kept her eyes trained on the camera lens and made sure to move slowly and deliberately so Indira could anticipate her actions and capture them. The silence in the room was punctuated only by the occasional sound of the camera shutter as Penelope took her time finding new ways to tease out a pose with her fingers. Eventually, and inevitably, she moved to grasp the zipper.

She was slow, so slow. She wanted this moment to last, this more than any other; she wanted to live here—the last moment where nothing had happened and everything was about to, the eternal instant before she became a monster.

So . . . she drew it out as long as she possibly could. She found new ways to move, using the whole of her body to justify each click of the shutter. Every new photo was a minor victory. If only I could hold my fingers here and keep posing forever, she thought. She breathed in— She was about to speak, to end the shoot, but she didn't get the chance.

“More,” said Indira.

Penelope’s head spun. It was happening again. They were getting too close, going too far. It wasn’t supposed to be like this; Indira was supposed to be the professional one and hold to their promise.

Penelope reluctantly undid the zipper to bare her underwear and leaned back against the blinds. The pose, the movements, the subtleties of expression came naturally to her, just as they always did—devoid of any true feeling. She hated how easy it was. If she was a work of art, her meaning was drawn from an empty well. It was just as Judith had told her—she would have no equals, no one who could understand or resist her, and no one who could measure her and find her wanting.

Indira was not taking any pictures. She had even lowered her camera, letting it hang loosely from her neck. She only studied her subject in silence.

“Indira.”

“Mm?” She now put a finger to her lips thoughtfully, still gazing at Penelope.

“Why aren’t you taking a picture?”

This apparently gave her some pause. “I don’t know,” she said after mulling it over.

The possibilities began to spiral out of control in Penelope’s mind, and in a panic she realised that she needed to take control. The game needed to end.

“Take the picture, Indi,” she said. “Last shot.”

Indira’s expression was hard to read, but something had clearly disturbed her. Slowly, reluctantly, she lifted the camera and captured the moment forever, allowing it to disappear harmlessly into the camera.

\* \* \*

Penelope zipped and buttoned up as she came away from the window and sat down on the edge of her bed, still mindful of guarding against accidental discoveries. Indira, eyes down, busied herself by reviewing the night’s work on her camera.

“You feeling okay?” Penelope found herself asking.

Indira muttered in the affirmative without looking up, then, with newfound resolve, spoke her mind.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

Penelope was confused. “What d’you mean? We got some good shots, didn’t we? Did they not turn out dreamy like you wanted?”

Indira looked up now. “Is that all this was to you?” she said. “Really, I mean. Is it just photos?”

Penelope knew immediately that she was in trouble. The reproach in Indira’s voice was unmistakable.

“What d’you mean?” she stalled. “We just did a photo-shoot.”

Indira sighed and ran a hand through her hair. At first, Penelope thought her ignorance might have bought her a reprieve. Not so.

“It’s just . . .” Indira began, “the way you were acting.” She was clearly having difficulty expressing her thoughts, or perhaps judging how much of them to share. “It’s like more was going on. More than just the shoot, like—”

“You asked for more,” Penelope cut in, “so I gave you more.”

This much, at least, was true, but it wasn’t the whole truth and Penelope knew it. As a foundation for her argument, it was weak. She moved on quickly, hoping to shore up her position before Indira could dismantle it by pointing out how many liberties she’d been taking.

“We need to be able to do erotic shoots together if this is going to work,” she said. “We agreed to be professional, and this is the job I hired you for.”

Indira hesitated. “Yes,” she said at last. “It is, but . . . I want to be honest with you, Penny. After what happened last time, I can’t believe that’s all this is. It feels real.” She waved a hand at the window where Penelope had been posing. “This, tonight, felt real.”

Her voice was somehow smaller now, less assertive. Penelope was momentarily at a loss. She didn’t understand the direction the conversation was taking. She tried to make sense of Indira’s expression, which the photographer was

taking pains to hide by looking back at her camera, and came up blank.

“I was just doing what was best for the shoot,” said Penelope, launching into another defence for her behaviour, though less passionate now. “We didn’t do anything wrong. I—We didn’t cross any lines.”

As she spoke, the shallowness of her own words undid her confidence. What had she been doing? And to what end? She wondered if there was a point at all.

Indira crossed her arms, and Penelope saw that her gaze was actually locked on the floor. “I’m not stupid, Penny,” she said. “I know there’s more to this than just a photo-shoot. I’m starting to feel—”

“If you’re worried because you think I’m hot,” Penelope interrupted, “then join the club. Literally; you’re like, my target demographic at the Carnival—it’s not weird.”

The threat of feelings had set Penelope off. She didn’t want Indira to become just another face in the crowd. Not another sacrifice at the altar to Judith. She choked back her own feelings and tried in vain to stop her voice from rising.

“I wasn’t coming on to you the other night,” she shot. “Why would I? You’re— I’m not gay.”

In the fullness of time, Penelope would come to understand the true depths of feeling that Indira succumbed to in that moment. For now, she remained ignorant. In fact, she repeated herself.



“I’m not gay.”

Indira again thrust her hands into her hair, nearly pulling apart her messy bun. Her glasses were pushed up the bridge of her nose and she turned away from Penelope. Her next words, spoken in a preternaturally calm voice, betrayed nothing.

“I think we have enough photos,” she said.

With that, she turned off the camera and slid the lens cap back into place. The tone of disappointment in her voice was unmistakable, and Penelope, though still unaware of the full extent of the damage, felt a wave of shame and guilt wash over her. She pushed herself up from the bed. She realised with a jolt that she didn’t want Indira to leave, and bit her lip.

“Indi,” she said gently.

Indira had taken a step towards the door, but she stopped now to listen. She did not speak.

“I— I think. No . . . I *know* that I’d like you to stay.”

All the feelings of wanting to keep Indira for herself, the desire to possess her and to be chaperoned by her in turn, came crashing down on her long-dormant conscience. She did feel afraid now, but only of losing her best chance at a connection with someone who might match her.

“Please, don’t leave me.”

There was a dreadful silence. Then, a long sigh. Indira turned around, looked back at Penelope. It was hard to

make out the tears on her cheek with only the bedside lamp for illumination, but not impossible. The smile was harder.

“Okay,” she said, “a little longer.”