Real This Time

Love behind the cameras

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Chapter 1: The Drunken Proposal

The Lumina Entertainment lobby buzzed with anticipation as journalists fidgeted in their seats, the air thick with the particular tension that arises when celebrities are fashionably late—not just late enough to seem important, but late enough to border on disrespect. Five rows of reporters checked their watches while another dozen pressed against the glass doors outside, cameras flashing in hopeful anticipation. The promised stars remained conspicuously absent at thirty minutes past the scheduled start time.

Instead, Fiona Hart's long-suffering manager Meredith Kane made her entrance with the practiced poise of someone accustomed to cleaning up other people's messes. She was flanked by terrified interns clutching raffle boxes that had clearly been repurposed from the studio's holiday party the month before.

"Everyone take a number!" Meredith announced, her voice carrying that strained cheerfulness that didn't quite reach her eyes. "There will be fabulous parting gifts!"

The reporters exchanged glances that collectively asked if this was a press conference or a game show taping. But they complied, knowing no one wanted to explain to their editors why they'd returned empty-handed from what was being called the most talked-about relationship announcement in recent Hollywood memory.

"We'll be taking exactly ten questions today," Meredith continued, her smile never wavering. "Two for our lovely couple, eight for me to creatively avoid answering."

The room erupted in protest. "This is outrageous!" cried a blogger from CelebCrush, rising to her feet. "I didn't wake up at 4 AM to be treated like I'm at the DMV!"

Meredith simply signaled security while mentally calculating how many margaritas it would take to forget this day.

When Fiona and Jake finally appeared, the atmosphere shifted from tense to actively hostile. Fiona looked every inch the Oscar-winning actress in her designer gown, except for the frozen smile that suggested she was mentally cataloging ways to make her publicist suffer. Jake, meanwhile, had clearly dressed in the dark—his "athleisure chic" ensemble clashing spectacularly with Fiona's glamour. They stood approximately three feet apart at all times, the space between them practically screaming "contractual obligation."

The Q&A session unfolded like a slow-motion train wreck.

"How did you two meet?" asked a reporter from Entertainment Weekly, leaning forward eagerly.

"Through mutual friends!" Meredith jumped in before either could respond.

Fiona, her smile never faltering, mouthed "He was my Lyft driver" to a Vogue photographer in the front row.

Jake spent most of the conference examining his cuticles with intense focus, only looking up when someone mentioned his failed sneaker collaboration from the previous year. By question seven, Fiona had begun subtly edging toward the emergency exit while Jake started texting what appeared to be his lawyer.

The grand finale came when a reporter asked point-blank if this was all for Jake's new reality show.

"Obviously" Fiona began before Meredith literally grabbed the microphone from her hand.

"That's all the time we have!" she announced, herding them toward the exit with alarming efficiency.

The reporter from Vanity Fair leaned forward eagerly, microphone poised like a weapon. "Jake, what would you say is your favorite thing about Fiona?"

The question hung in the air, thick with the unspoken context of Jake's rabid fanbase, who had spent the past month flooding social media with accusations that Fiona was a talentless social climber trying to ride Jake's coattails to relevance. Fiona felt her manicured nails dig into her palms. If they wanted a villain, she'd give them a performance worthy of her Oscar.

She tilted her head in mock contemplation, letting the silence stretch just long enough to be uncomfortable.

"Well," Fiona purred, batting her eyelashes with practiced sincerity, "I'd have to say...my world-famous physical attributes?"

The room erupted in gasps and hastily stifled laughter. Even the most jaded entertainment reporters looked shocked—sure, everyone knew Fiona Hart was stunning, but to reduce their "relationship" to pure physical attraction? This was catnip for the tabloids.

The final selected reporter practically vibrated with excitement. "For both of you—what's your strongest impression of each other in daily life?"

Fiona opened her mouth to deliver some canned romantic drivel, but Jake beat her to it.

"We've never actually hung out," he said flatly, examining his nails with the intensity of a man trying to teleport himself anywhere else.

The resulting chaos resembled a stock market crash crossed with a mosh pit. Reporters scrambled for their phones, already drafting clickbait headlines. Fiona could practically see the tweets materializing in the air: #FakeCoupleExposed, #PRStuntGoneWrong, #JakeAndFionaIsOverBeforeItBegan.

Meredith's professional smile remained frozen in place, though her left eye had developed a concerning twitch.

"Thank you all so much for coming!" she trilled over the din, herding journalists toward the exits with the ruthless efficiency of a border collie. "Don't forget to collect your complimentary gift bags featuring Jake's new signature cologne, 'Contractual Obligation'!"

The moment the last reporter was out the door, Jake bolted like his designer sneakers were on fire, leaving Fiona standing alone in a cloud of awkwardness and expensive perfume.

Fiona seethed as the sound of Jake's obnoxiously loud sports car faded into the distance. Mr. "Too-Cool-for-PR" couldn't even pretend to be civil for five more minutes. Never mind that she'd just finished back-to-back sixteen-hour days reshooting the third act of Galactic Heist 4, or that her promised three-day vacation—her first real break since that ill-advised rom-com two years ago—had been cut brutally short.

All because of one stupid happy hour margarita and its even stupider fifty-percent-off promotion.

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*24 Hours Earlier*

Fiona slammed into the Lumina conference room with all the grace of a sleep-deprived wildebeest, still wearing yesterday's eyeliner and with enough caffeine in her bloodstream to power a small country. She'd expected a quick meeting with her agent—maybe some new endorsement deals to veto, or another script about a plucky journalist falling for a vampire. What she got was the entire executive team arranged around the mahogany table like a corporate firing squad, with Meredith at the head radiating enough icy disdain to flash-freeze a lesser mortal.

Every survival instinct in Fiona's body screamed to turn around and pretend this was the wrong room. She mentally cataloged her recent sins: Had she tweeted about the "Galactic Heist" director again? Forgotten to thank some important producer at the People's Choice Awards? That tequila-fueled karaoke video from Ibiza had been securely buried under six layers of NDAs, right?

"Close the door, Fiona," Meredith said in that terrifyingly calm voice usually reserved for announcing budget cuts and canceled projects. "We need to discuss your...evening with Jake Carter."

The way she said "evening" made it sound like Fiona had personally assassinated the studio mascot. Fiona's stomach dropped faster than her Rotten Tomatoes score for Cyber Bride 2.

Fiona hovered in the doorway of Meredith's office, her heart already racing with dread at the unnervingly sweet tone in her manager's voice.

"Fifi! There you are. Come, come, sit down."

That saccharine smile didn't reach Meredith's eyes—a telltale sign Fiona had learned to fear over their decade working together. The last time Meredith had used that particular tone, Fiona had woken up to seventeen missed calls and a Twitter scandal about her "drunkenly adopting a stray goat" at 3AM.

Sinking into the plush chair across from Meredith's immaculate glass desk, Fiona's mind raced through recent transgressions. She'd been (mostly) good lately—no public meltdowns, and she'd even remembered to wish the studio head happy birthday last week. Yet Meredith's perfectly manicured fingers were tapping an ominous rhythm against a thick manila folder ominously labeled "BAR - 10/15" in bold red marker. The air conditioning seemed to drop another five degrees as Fiona noticed the telltale vein pulsing at Meredith's temple, the one that only appeared when damage control budgets exceeded seven figures.

"You look...rested," Meredith began, pouring Fiona a cup of tea that would definitely go untouched. "How was your little vacation? Before, of course, we had to...interrupt it."

Her smile widened, revealing just a bit too much teeth. Fiona's palms started sweating. That folder definitely contained photographic evidence of something terrible. The question was—how terrible? Did she make out with a fire hydrant again? Or was this more along the lines of the time she'd accidentally auctioned off her underwear for "charity" while blackout drunk in Cabo?

Meredith slid the folder across the desk with one blood-red nail. "Perhaps you'd like to explain why our PR team has been fielding calls since 5AM about you and Jake Carter's...intimate evening?"

The blood drained from Fiona's face as fragmented memories surfaced: Tequila. A dare about who could handle spicier food. That weird Elvis impersonator...

"Meredith," she croaked, "I can explain."

Across the desk, her manager's smile turned glacial. "Oh, this I have to hear."

The silence stretched as Fiona's mind blanked. How did one explain what appeared to be a drunken Vegas wedding to a man whose last name she couldn't properly remember? Especially when her entire brand was built on being Hollywood's lovable, un-dateable hot mess?

Fiona's palms grew clammy as she stared at Meredith's expectant face. *Explain?* her brain screamed. *Isn't this the part in movies where they dramatically say 'I don't want to hear your excuses' and storm out? What kind of messed-up script is this where I actually have to come up with an explanation?*

"I think...I think..." Fiona's eyes darted around the room like a cornered animal before landing on Meredith's Chanel brooch. Inspiration struck.

"Oh! I remember now! It was my day off, and I went shopping because Chanel dropped their new collection. You know me, Meredith—Chanel is basically my religion." She flashed her most winning smile, the one that usually got her out of gym class in high school.

Meredith's expression didn't budge. "Fascinating," she deadpanned. "Now perhaps you'd like to explain the part where you didn't stop at handbags?"

Fiona's nervous laugh came out sounding more like a deflating balloon. "Right! So I may have...sort of...bought the entire collection?" She waved her hands excitedly. "But that's not the point! The point is, after my very responsible shopping spree, I happened to walk past this bar with a sign saying 'All drinks 50% off!'"

She leaned forward conspiratorially. "Fifty percent, Meredith! That's basically buy-one-get-one! Which is practically free! And when something's free, it would be financially irresponsible NOT to partake, don't you think?"

She held up four fingers in solemn vow. "I swear I only meant to have one tiny drink. One!" The words tumbled out faster as Meredith's glare intensified. "Like, a baby drink. A sip, really. The kind of drink where the alcohol is more of a suggestion than—"

"Let me make this simple," Meredith interrupted, her voice dripping with venom. "Why don't you swear right now that if you had more than one drink, you'll be struck by lightning where you sit?" She gestured meaningfully toward the floor-to-ceiling windows where an unseasonably dark cloud loomed.

Fiona's fingers snapped back into her palm so fast she nearly gave herself a paper cut. "Okay, okay! I might have lost count after the first...seven? But everything after that is a complete blank, I swear!" She crossed her heart with genuine earnestness. "That part I can actually promise."

Meredith looked ready to spontaneously combust. "How many times have we told you? You're a goddamn lightweight! You can't be doing tequila shooters in public like some sorority girl on spring break!"

"But drinking alone at home is so depressing," Fiona muttered under her breath, immediately regretting it as Meredith's face turned an alarming shade of purple.

With the dramatic flair of a judge delivering a death sentence, Meredith slammed a tabloid onto the glass table. The impact made Fiona's untouched teacup rattle ominously. "Explain THIS."

Fiona's hands trembled as she turned the paper around. The headline screamed up at her in 72-point font: "SHOCKING AFFAIR! A-LIST ACTRESS FIONA HART GROPES HEARTTHROB JAKE CARTER IN DRUNKEN BAR CLASH!"

Beneath it, despite the grainy quality, there was no mistaking the damning photo: Fiona, face lit up like a Christmas tree, clinging to a visibly distressed Jake Carter like he was the last lifeboat on the Titanic. The angle perfectly captured her starry-eyed, drool-adjacent expression while Jake appeared to be attempting (and failing) to peel her off with a cocktail stirrer.

"Deeply embracing? EMBRACING MY ASS!" Fiona shrieked, leaping up so fast her chair toppled over with a crash. "This is clearly a case of malicious framing! That's not a romantic gaze—that's the tequila squints! And he's not pushing me away, he's...helping me stand! Because I'm such a good friend!"

Meredith slowly removed her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Fiona," she said with terrifying calm, "that's Jake Carter. You've met him exactly once—at last year's Teen Choice Awards when you called him 'that TikTok kid' to his face."

The color drained from Fiona's face as the full horror of the situation dawned. Somewhere between the fifth tequila sunrise and whatever demon drink came after, she'd apparently molested one of Hollywood's most beloved heartthrobs—and the entire world had the photographic evidence.

Fiona stared at the damning tabloid photo, her stomach twisting into knots. In her defense, she really had just intended to enjoy a single discounted cocktail—what harm could one little drink do? She'd woken up safely in her own bed this morning after all, with nothing worse than a pounding headache and some patchy memories. How was she supposed to know her tipsy self would turn into some kind of handsy bar predator targeting one of Hollywood's most beloved heartthrobs?

As the reality of her situation sank in, Fiona's breathing grew shallow. This wasn't just some silly meme-able mishap like wearing long underwear to a summer premiere. This was career-ending stuff. She could already imagine the think pieces: "From Oscar Winner to Harasser: The Fall of Fiona Hart." Her commercial contracts dissolving. Her carefully cultivated image as Hollywood's lovable hot mess crumbling into something far more sinister.

Meredith's voice cut through her spiraling thoughts like a knife. "There's no sugarcoating this, Fifi. Your fans might forgive you, but Carter's stans? They'll make sure you never work in this town again."

The cold finality in her tone made Fiona's blood run cold. In a panic, she launched herself across the desk, narrowly avoiding the untouched tea.

"Meredith! My angel! My savior!" she wailed, clutching at her manager's blazer sleeves. "You can't let this happen! Think of my flawless complexion! My endorsement deals! My...my mortgage payments!"

She attempted to conjure tears, squeezing her eyes shut dramatically. "I'm a national treasure! America needs me!"

Meredith peeled Fiona's fingers off her jacket with the disdain of someone removing gum from their shoe. "Your acting was more convincing Cyber Bride 2, and that's saying something."

Just when Fiona thought things couldn't get worse, her agent chimed in with that terrifyingly cheerful tone people use before suggesting something awful. "There is one way we could spin this..." she began, and Fiona immediately knew she was about to hate whatever came next. "We could always...lean into it. You know, make it look intentional."

Fiona's head whipped around so fast she nearly gave herself whiplash. "You want me to fake date him?" she screeched, voice cracking embarrassingly. "Have you lost your mind? I don't do relationships—real or otherwise! My brand is being the unattainable queen who answers to no man!"

Meredith remained unmoved. "Would you prefer to explain to Chanel why they're dropping you as their face? Or maybe you'd enjoy personally reimbursing Netflix for the reshoots you'll be cut from?" Each word landed like a hammer blow.

To add insult to injury, her agent cheerfully added, "And honestly, Jake's team might say no. He's become quite the hot commodity lately."

Fiona's ego took direct artillery fire at that. "Excuse me?" she spluttered, outrage momentarily overriding her panic. "He should be paying me for this privilege! I'm a literal Academy Award winner! He's just...some guy who took his shirt off in a music video once!"

The hypocrisy of this statement, coming from someone who'd built her early career on rom-coms featuring ample pool scenes, was lost on her in the heat of the moment.

Meredith stood, effectively ending the discussion. "Go home, Fifi. We'll handle the negotiations. Try not to drunkenly assault any more celebrities on your way out."

The dismissal in her voice was absolute. As Fiona slunk out of the office, she couldn't shake the sinking feeling that her life was about to become infinitely more complicated. All because of one stupid happy hour special.

Maybe she should have just stuck to shopping.  
  
Chapter 2: The Devil Wears Oscar Gold

Meredith Kane sat in the tastefully minimal reception area of Carter Global Entertainment, her usual confidence slightly undermined by the stakes of this meeting. The portfolio in her lap contained a proposal so generous it bordered on surrender terms—full creative control, veto power on all publicity, and a lion's share of profits from any joint appearances. All for the privilege of having Jake Carter pretend not to be horrified by Fiona's drunken antics.

She adjusted her Armani blazer, mentally preparing for battle. Hollywood ran on manufactured romances, but this situation was different. Most rising stars would kill to be linked with someone of Fiona's caliber, yet Meredith knew the Carters played by different rules.

The door opened with a quiet click, pulling Meredith from her thoughts. A woman in a perfectly tailored emerald Stella McCartney dress entered with the effortless confidence of someone who owned the building—which, Meredith realized with a start, she literally did. Evelyn Carter, founder of Carter Entertainment and Jake's older sister, regarded Meredith with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Meredith Kane," she said, extending a perfectly manicured hand. "I've heard so much about you from Fifi."

The casual use of Fiona's nickname sent Meredith's internal alarms blaring. This wasn't just a business meeting—there was history here.

As they settled into opposing chairs, Evelyn flipped through the proposal without comment. The silence stretched just long enough to become uncomfortable before she finally spoke.

"This is... comprehensive," she remarked, tapping one particular clause about profit sharing. "Though I can't help but wonder why we'd want to attach Jake to what appears to be," she paused delicately, "a reputation salvage operation." Her gaze lifted, sharp and assessing. "Unless you're admitting Fiona needs Jake more than he needs her?"

Meredith's professional mask didn't falter, though her grip on her Hermès portfolio tightened imperceptibly. "Evelyn, let's be honest," she countered smoothly. "Your brother may have the streaming numbers, but Fiona has the prestige. An Oscar winner, three Golden Globes, and," she allowed herself a small smile, "the highest-grossing rom-com of the decade. This partnership would give Jake something money can't buy—credibility beyond TikTok and teenage bedroom walls."

Evelyn's lips quirked, though whether in amusement or annoyance, Meredith couldn't tell. "Credibility?" she repeated, arching one perfectly shaped brow. "From the woman who famously called method acting 'pretentious mansplaining' in her Oscar acceptance speech?" She set the proposal aside. "What exactly would stop this from looking like a desperate attempt to rehabilitate Fiona's image after she," Evelyn's voice dropped to a mock whisper, "assaulted my brother in public?"

The barb hit its mark, but Meredith had navigated Hollywood politics too long to show it. "What stops it," she said evenly, "is that the alternative is far worse for both parties. Right now, the narrative is 'Drunken Oscar Winner Harasses Pop Star.' But with the right spin?" Meredith leaned forward. "It becomes 'Hollywood's Oddest Couple—How a Chance Meeting Sparked Something Real.' People Magazine will be begging for the exclusive."

A beat passed. Then another. Evelyn studied Meredith with new interest before reaching for a Mont Blanc pen. "I'll give you three months," she said finally. "And we retain final approval on all press releases, social media posts, and public appearances." The pen hovered over the paper. "Oh, and one more condition—Fiona apologizes to Jake. In person. Before we sign anything."

Meredith exhaled slowly. The battle was won, but the war was just beginning. Somewhere in the Hollywood Hills, Fiona was probably burning toast and blissfully unaware she was about to enter the most challenging acting role of her career—pretending to be madly in love with the man she'd publicly humiliated. And, Meredith thought with grim amusement, the man whose sister clearly knew far too much about Fiona's past for this to be a simple business transaction.

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On the other side of Los Angeles, Jake Carter was having his own crisis. He stared at his phone in disbelief, the call with his father leaving him more confused than before.

"Dad, Mom went to my office again? Why didn't you warn me?"

"Your mother didn't tell me anything," his father sighed, the resignation of a decades-long marriage evident in his voice. "She just said Chanel released their spring collection and she needed to go shopping. Wouldn't even let me tag along."

Jake hung up before his father could launch into another story about their suspiciously perfect marriage. Twenty-six years of listening to their nauseating devotion was more than enough. He immediately called the source of his problems.

"Mom, why did you go to my office?" he asked without preamble.

"Jakey!" His mother's voice was bright with practiced innocence. "I just missed you and thought I'd surprise you! How was I supposed to know you wouldn't be there?"

*Of course I wasn't there*, Jake thought irritably*. What chart-topping artist hangs around their management office all day?*

"Oh, by the way," his mother continued casually, "Fiona Hart's manager stopped by. Quite stunning in person! Beautiful people always gravitate toward other beautiful people. My sweet Fiona is absolutely gorgeous too."

"*My* Fiona?" Jake's eyebrows shot up. Last he checked, they had only one child—him. "Fiona Hart? The actress you've been obsessing over since her latest Oscar-bait drama? Weren't you done with that fixation?"

"Fine," he continued when his mother didn't immediately respond to his incredulity. "What did your precious Fiona's manager want, and why was she looking for me?"

"Just a little collaboration!" His mother's voice lilted with manufactured nonchalance. "You know, to help salvage Fiona's reputation after you compromised her at that bar last night. Poor thing."

*Bar? Compromised? What?*

Then it hit him—that drunk woman who'd clung to him like a barnacle, impossible to shake off despite her tiny frame. He'd finally managed to extract himself by escorting her to a waiting car. How was that "compromising" anyone?

So that was Fiona Hart? The Oscar-winning actress his mother couldn't stop talking about?

"What kind of collaboration?" he asked, already dreading the answer.

"A contractual relationship!" his mother chirped, as if announcing he'd won a prize.

"A WHAT?" The words came out as a strangled growl.

"I've already signed the agreement. You just need to cooperate. Oh, and when you see Fiona, take lots of pictures for me! And ask her if 'Eternal Dawn' is getting a sequel!"

"You signed WHAT? Who gave you permission—"

"Jakey!" His mother's voice turned wounded. "Are you raising your voice at me? Your father has never raised his voice at me in thirty years of marriage!"

"No, no," he backpedaled, knowing from experience this particular battle was unwinnable. "I'm... thanking you. For setting this up."

"Well," his mother sniffed, "being linked with our Fiona should be considered an honor, you know. She's an Academy Award winner!"

This was going nowhere. "Bye, Mom."

He immediately called his assistant. "Evan, check if there's a new contract on my desk."

"On it... yes, it's here."

"Can you review the terms? Tell me if there's any way to cancel it."

"Sure thing." After a brief silence, Evan's voice returned, higher-pitched with surprise. "Wait—you're going to fake-date Fiona Hart? *The* Fiona Hart?"

"Yes," Jake replied tersely. "Just tell me if it can be canceled."

"Cancel it? Why would you want to? I'd give my left kidney to meet the actual Fiona Ha—"

"Enough! Can I cancel it or not?"

"Afraid not. There's no termination clause, and according to this, you need to post a confirmation on social media within the next twenty minutes. Oh, and your mother left a note saying if you don't cooperate, don't bother coming home for Sunday dinner... ever again."

Jake hung up, needing space to process this disaster. His own mother had sold him out for her celebrity crush.

At 8 PM, a text arrived from Fiona's publicist with the content for his social media announcement.

A simple statement: "This isn't just a rumor, this is my girlfriend."

He couldn't do it. Not with those words. Jake logged into Twitter, tagged both management companies and Fiona's account, and wrote five simple words: "Everything she says is right."

There. Technically compliant, but maintaining some dignity.

As the internet exploded with reactions, Jake felt momentary satisfaction—until he saw that his tweet had more engagement than Fiona's announcement. That wasn't part of the plan.

Before he could worry about the fallout, his phone buzzed with a calendar invitation. His heart sank as he read the details.

***Couple's Challenge Week. Live streaming apartment. With Fiona Hart.***

His management had thrown him to the wolves.

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Fiona stared at her phone screen, her expression cycling through disbelief, outrage, and finally resignation. It had been five hours since Meredith had texted her with the simple message: *It's done. Make the announcement.*

No additional details. No explanation about how she'd convinced Jake Carter's team—with their reputation for being more selective than a Michelin-star restaurant critic—to agree to this ridiculous charade. Just seven words and a social media template that made Fiona cringe with its saccharine simplicity.

She'd posted it anyway, because what choice did she have? Her career was hanging by a thread, and if pretending to date some pop star who'd probably had his abs surgically enhanced was the price of salvation, she'd pay it.

But Jake's response—that maddeningly vague *Everything she says is right* —had thrown her. What was that supposed to mean? Was he agreeing they were dating? Or implying she was right to find him attractive? The ambiguity was clearly deliberate, a subtle pushback that both fulfilled his contractual obligation and maintained plausible deniability.

"Two can play that game," Fiona muttered, scrolling through the tsunami of notifications flooding her phone.

The internet had predictably lost its collective mind. #FionaAndJake was trending worldwide, with three distinct factions emerging: devastated Jake Carter fans mourning the loss of their parasocial boyfriend, skeptical entertainment journalists questioning the timing, and a surprisingly vocal new demographic Fiona's publicist had labeled "shippers"—fans enthusiastically supporting this unexpected pairing despite having precisely zero evidence of their compatibility.

It was this last group that fascinated Fiona. Within hours, they'd created fan accounts, compiled "evidence" of previous encounters she and Jake had never actually had, and begun writing what her assistant hesitantly informed her was called "fan fiction" about their relationship.

"They think we're star-crossed lovers who've been secretly pining for each other for years," Fiona told her cat, who demonstrated appropriately feline indifference to celebrity gossip. "One viral post says I deliberately got drunk to have an excuse to approach him after we shared 'meaningful eye contact' at the Billboard Music Awards last year."

She hadn't even attended the Billboard Music Awards last year. She'd been on location in New Zealand, filming a period drama that required her to learn archery and develop a specific regional accent that had nearly broken her spirit.

But facts, it seemed, were irrelevant in the face of a good narrative.

Her phone pinged with a notification from Meredith, and Fiona's momentary amusement evaporated.

*NBC wants you both the "Couple's Challenge Week." Starts filming Friday. Non-negotiable. Wear something that coordinates with blue, but not actual blue. That's Jake's color.*

Fiona blinked at the message. "Couple's Challenge Week? What the hell is that?"

A quick internet search later, and Fiona felt her stomach drop for the second time that day. Apparently, it was a week-long special where celebrity couples lived together in a camera-filled apartment, participating in daily challenges designed to "test their bond" while livestreaming their everyday interactions.

It was, essentially, a reality show. The very thing Fiona had spent her entire career avoiding, valuing her privacy almost as much as her craft. And now she was expected to cohabitate with a virtual stranger while cameras documented their every awkward interaction?

"No," she told her cat firmly. "Absolutely not. This crosses a line."

Three furious phone calls later—one to Meredith, one to her agent, and one to her lawyer—Fiona had to accept the devastating truth: the contract her manager had signed did, in fact, include provisions for "reality television appearances as mutually agreed upon by management."

And apparently, both managements had already agreed.

She was going to have to live with Jake Carter, on camera, for an entire week. She barely knew the man, except that he made music her teenage niece played at ear-splitting volumes and had been distinctly unimpressed by her drunken advances. How were they supposed to convince anyone they were madly in love?

As if summoned by her panic, a text appeared from an unknown number:

*This is Jake. I hear we're going to be roommates. Fair warning: I'm allergic to artificial sweeteners, most social media influencers, and conversations before 10 AM. Looking forward to our scripted romance.*

Fiona stared at the message, equal parts irritated and intrigued by his direct approach. At least he wasn't pretending this was anything but a business arrangement.

She typed back:

*Fair warning returned: I sleepwalk, stress-eat exotic cheeses at 3 AM, and have been known to accidentally set kitchen appliances on fire. Not looking forward to any of this, but I'll try not to ruin your carefully cultivated image*

His response came seconds later:

*Too late for that. See you Friday, "girlfriend."*

The quotation marks spoke volumes.

Fiona tossed her phone aside and flopped dramatically onto her couch, startling her cat into offended retreat. This was going to be a disaster of epic proportions. She just knew it.

Chapter 3: Bush-Wookies and Buffalo Wings

The production team disappeared after a whirlwind of activity, leaving Fiona and Jake alone in the stylishly furnished downtown Manhattan loft. Cameras peeked from strategic corners, their presence a constant reminder that despite the illusion of privacy, thousands of viewers were witnessing their every move on NBC's livestream.

They hadn't exchanged a single word since the overly enthusiastic PA had given them a tour, yet the viewer count was already breaking records. America was hungry for their first real glimpse of Hollywood's most unexpected couple—the Oscar-winning actress and the chart-topping musician forced into cohabitation for Jimmy Fallon's viewing pleasure.

Fiona sank onto the West Elm sectional, as far from Jake as physically possible while still sharing the same piece of furniture. She stared at her phone, pretending to be absorbed in social media updates while secretly plotting her manager's demise for getting her into this situation. Across the vast expanse of premium upholstery, Jake mirrored her posture, his own phone a shield against the awkwardness hanging in the air between them.

Five excruciating minutes passed with nothing but the sound of their thumbs scrolling through their respective feeds. The silence was both deeply uncomfortable and somehow fitting—two people thrown together by circumstance, pretending their proximity was anything but a contractual obligation.

*This is ridiculous*, Fiona thought, sneaking a glance at Jake's stoic profile. *He could at least try to make conversation. Would it kill him to ask about my day?*

The man radiated ice—smooth, polished, and utterly impenetrable. His public persona as the calm, composed musician translated perfectly to real life, it seemed. Every feature remained carefully neutral as he focused on his screen, as if Fiona weren't even in the room.

Her stomach chose that moment to growl audibly—an embarrassingly human sound in the sterile peace of their standoff. Food. She needed food. This silent treatment game was officially over; she surrendered.

But what could she say? She couldn't exactly start a fight with America's pop prince—if his rabid Twitter stans discovered they were faking the relationship, the cancel culture mob would probably end her career faster than you could say "Academy Award revoked."

While her fans were content creating memes of her drunken mishaps, his were organized like a paramilitary operation, ready to defend their boy at all costs. The golden rule of celebrity fandoms: the fans are simply a reflection of their idol.

Fiona quietly rose from the sofa, feeling Jake's eyes briefly flick up to track her movement before returning to his phone. She headed to her assigned bedroom to change into something more comfortable, letting her hair down from its carefully structured updo and tying it into a messy bun. The simple act felt like shedding a skin—Oscar Nominee Fiona Hart transforming into just Fiona, a woman who wanted nothing more than to eat something delicious and maybe not completely humiliate herself on national television.

In the kitchen, she rummaged through drawers until she found a fruit knife. The refrigerator yielded exactly two apples and nothing else—clearly the producers wanted them to either starve or order food for the cameras. She returned to the living room with knife and apple in hand, switching on the lights as dusk settled over Manhattan.

Jake finally looked up from his phone, his gaze immediately landing on the knife gleaming in her hand. Something flashed across his face—alarm? concern?—before his features smoothed back into careful neutrality.

"Are you hungry too?" Fiona asked, suddenly self-conscious under his scrutiny. "I was about to peel an apple. Would you like one?"

Jake's eyes darted from the knife to her face, then back again. "Yes," he said simply, the word carrying a hint of wariness.

Fiona settled on the edge of the sofa and began peeling the apple with the focused determination of someone performing heart surgery. Her tongue poked slightly from the corner of her mouth as she concentrated, oblivious to how the knife repeatedly slipped, creating a massacre rather than the elegant spiral she'd envisioned.

After several minutes of struggle, she triumphantly handed Jake what could only charitably be described as an apple—though it resembled something that had survived multiple natural disasters.

Jake stared at the mangled fruit in his hand, turning it over as if searching for an intact portion. His perfectly sculpted eyebrows drew together in confusion.

"Give it to me," he said suddenly.

"Excuse me?" Fiona bristled at his tone. First, he barely acknowledges her existence, and now he's demanding her apple too? The entitled nerve of this man!

Without waiting for her response, Jake leaned forward and carefully transferred the fruit to his other hand. He reached out and took the knife from her with unexpected gentleness.

"Mind grabbing a plate from the kitchen?" he asked, his voice carrying a warmth that caught her completely off guard.

Something shifted in Fiona's perception of him. The Ice Prince of pop music suddenly seemed... considerate? The unexpected kindness in his tone momentarily short-circuited her brain. She found herself nodding and hurrying to the kitchen without a snarky comeback.

She returned with a plate and moved the trash can closer to Jake, watching as he salvaged what he could from her apple-peeling disaster. He placed the edible bits on the plate and pushed it toward her before grabbing the second apple and beginning to peel it with practiced ease.

The peel came off in one continuous spiral, revealing years of practice. His long, elegant fingers worked with precision, probably from years of playing instruments. According to her social media deep-dives, he played piano, guitar, and apparently... apple.

*Maybe he's not completely terrible,* Fiona thought, munching on apple pieces while openly watching him. Handsome AND domestic skills? The internet would implode if they knew.

Jake quickly prepared the second apple, cut it into perfect bite-sized pieces, and added them to her plate before taking the knife to the kitchen. Fiona sat on the sofa, lost in thought, absently eating apple slices. The peace between them felt strangely natural.

When Jake returned from the kitchen, wiping his hands on his jeans, he looked more relaxed than she'd seen him since their arrangement began.

"So, there's literally no food in the fridge," he said, glancing around the apartment. "Guessing they want us to go shopping, but..." he checked his watch, "it's getting late. Delivery?"

"YES!" Fiona nearly shouted, then caught herself. "I mean, yes, delivery sounds great." She quickly stuffed the remaining apple pieces into her mouth, nodding enthusiastically.

If he only knew. Her nutritionist, her trainer, and especially Meredith had kept her on a "camera-ready" diet for the past six months while filming her period drama. Kale smoothies. Grilled chicken. Plain quinoa. She'd started dreaming about cheeseburgers.

This show was suddenly feeling less like a PR nightmare and more like a vacation from her real life. Meredith couldn't reach through the cameras to slap pizza out of her hand.

"I'll order!" she offered, eyes bright with anticipation. "Any allergies or things you hate?"

Jake seemed slightly taken aback by her enthusiasm. "No allergies. I'm good with whatever."

He studied her for a moment. Just the prospect of takeout food had transformed her from Hollywood ice queen to excited kid. What kind of pressure was she under in her normal life?

He knew the industry well enough—his family's money had launched Carter Entertainment precisely so he wouldn't face the typical music industry exploitation. But not everyone had that protection.

(Meanwhile, Meredith sneezed during her business meeting across town. "Someone's talking about me," she muttered. "Probably Fiona. God knows what trouble she's getting into on that ridiculous dating show.")

"Food's ordered!" Fiona announced triumphantly, putting down her phone. "Now we wait."

She began exploring the apartment properly for the first time, checking which bedroom was Jake's and which was hers. When she discovered a third door, curiosity pulled her forward. Pushing it open, she let out an audible gasp.

"Holy. Freaking. CRAP."

The room was a gamer's paradise. Sleek black and gray decor, a wall-mounted screen, ambient lighting, a high-end gaming PC, and—most importantly—a professional gaming chair with LED lighting.

Few people knew about Fiona Hart's secret hobby. Between her Oscar-bait dramas and fashion campaigns, she was an avid gamer. Not in a casual "I play Candy Crush" way, but in a "sometimes skips industry parties to dominate in Call of Duty" way.

Meredith had practically forbidden it, claiming it didn't fit her "brand image." But here? On a livestream where she was supposed to act natural with her fake boyfriend? Perfect cover.

She slid into the gaming chair, feeling its ergonomic support cradle her spine. Heaven. She powered up the PC, logged into her Battle.net account (praying Meredith wouldn't recognize her gaming handle), and grinned like a kid on Christmas morning.

What Fiona failed to remember was that while she might be in her element, she was also being broadcast to millions of viewers—including her diehard fans, Jake's fans, and a healthy contingent of skeptics.

Fiona cracked her knuckles dramatically, adjusted her posture, and with ceremonious precision, clicked on Call of Duty: Warzone.

Her in-game operator loaded up in the most garish, mismatched outfit possible—neon green tactical gear, a luchador mask, rainbow weapon skins, and a charm dangling from her sniper rifle that looked suspiciously like a rubber duck.

The match began, and while her teammates dropped into high-traffic zones, Fiona directed her gaudy operator to a remote corner of the map. There, she proceeded to meticulously search every building and open every crate, collecting supplies with the focus of someone defusing a bomb.

Just as she finished looting a house and prepared to venture outside...

The dreaded sound of a helicopter approaching.

"Oh crap, crap, crap," she muttered, immediately ducking behind a counter. She'd spent fifteen minutes gathering equipment; she wasn't about to lose it now.

She crept upstairs with exaggerated caution, positioning herself in a corner with her ridiculously decorated sniper rifle aimed at the staircase.

"I'm not scared, I'm not scared," she whispered to herself, gripping the mouse with white knuckles. "I've got this."

The helicopter landed nearby. Relief flooded her—until footsteps crunched outside. They were coming for her.

Fiona's eyes widened in panic. "My loadout," she whispered mournfully. "I just got my custom weapons!"

Then, under the watchful eyes of millions, Fiona made her decision. She stood up.

Nope.

She deployed a smoke grenade inside the house (completely obscuring her own vision), then sprinted blindly for the nearest door. Somehow, she made it outside, then proceeded to dive into the nearest bush and go perfectly still.

Crouched in the bush, Fiona remained motionless, only her character's ridiculous luchador mask partially visible as she watched the enemy team search the house she'd just abandoned.

Just as she was perfecting her bush-hiding technique, her phone suddenly rang from the side table.

Already on edge, she nearly jumped out of her skin—literally throwing her mouse across the desk in terror.

Heart still racing, she tentatively picked up her phone and answered it.

It was the delivery driver calling to say they had arrived. But Fiona faced a critical dilemma—she was at a life-or-death moment in her game. She couldn't possibly abandon her ridiculous luchador-masked character now!

What if she returned to find her precious operator had become nothing but a loot box in the bushes? Unacceptable! She'd spent twenty minutes finding her perfect loadout with the rare Ghost perk!

This was exactly when having a fake boyfriend could prove useful, right?

"Jake!" she called out in what she thought was a sweet, persuasive voice. "The food's here! Could you get the door? I'm kinda... busy!"

Her shout practically gave Jake a heart attack as he scrolled through his phone in the living room. What was this woman up to now?

With a resigned sigh, he set down his phone and unfolded his long legs from the couch. The doorbell hadn't even rung yet, but he decided to see what Fiona was doing that was so important.

Pushing open the door to the gaming room, he found her perched on the gaming chair with both legs pulled up, arms wrapped around her knees, eyes locked on the screen with an intensity usually reserved for defusing bombs.

Was she... watching a horror movie? Bold choice for a livestream, but at least she seemed engaged with something.

But as he stepped closer, he realized this wasn't a horror movie at all.

He might not be a gamer himself, but even he recognized Call of Duty: Warzone. What he couldn't understand was how she was playing without using the mouse or keyboard. Her hands were nowhere near the controls, yet the character on screen remained in position.

Before he could puzzle it out further, the doorbell rang. Right, the delivery.

Fiona was clearly too absorbed in... whatever this motionless gaming style was... to be disturbed. He'd handle it himself.

When he opened the apartment door, the delivery driver looked down at his phone.

"Hi there, are you 'Warzone Queen'? Your order's here."

Jake hesitated for a microsecond, then nodded. "Yes, that's me."

The moment he claimed the username, the driver froze. The young man slowly raised his head, confusion washing over his face as he took in Jake Carter—Grammy-winning musician and decidedly not "Warzone Queen."

"Wait... um..." The driver glanced from his phone to Jake and back again. "Could I just verify the last four digits of the phone number?"

Jake stood in awkward silence. Great. Now he was trying to steal food from a delivery driver because his fake girlfriend had used a ridiculous gaming username to order Thai food.

"Hold on," Jake told the driver, failing to hide his annoyance. "Let me get the actual 'Warzone Queen.'"

After quickly explaining that he wasn't trying to steal food, Jake headed back inside to retrieve the actual orderer.

Approaching the gaming room again, he noticed something odd—Fiona's screen looked exactly the same as before. No movement, no action. Just a garish character lying in a bush.

Wait. Was she actually... playing? Mouse untouched, keyboard abandoned, just... staring at a screen while her character hid in digital foliage?

Jake was beginning to wonder about the mental stability of his fake girlfriend. Not in a game-expert way—he wasn't one to judge gaming skills—but in a "is she all there?" kind of way.

He gently tapped her shoulder. This time she didn't jump, just removed her headphones and looked up at him with innocent eyes.

"Did you get the food? You can start eating, I'll finish this match first."

"No, the driver needs to verify your phone number."

Fiona frowned, wringing her hands anxiously. "But..." She glanced back at the screen where her character remained motionless in the bush.

Jake couldn't believe what he was seeing. She was genuinely distressed about leaving a game where she literally wasn't doing anything.

"I could watch it for you," he offered, immediately wondering why he was enabling this. "If someone comes, I'll play for you."

"You will? But... do you know how?" Her skepticism was obvious.

"No, but from what I've seen, neither do you."

His blunt assessment sparked something in her. She huffed indignantly. "That's not true! This is a tactical approach. See those three guys searching? If I move now, I'm dead!"

"Right. But eventually, they'll find you if you just stay there not moving."

"Who says I'm not moving? I'm waiting for the right moment to steal their vehicle and escape."

"And do you know how to drive in the game?"

Her expression deflated instantly. The nerve of this guy! Calling her out like that in front of a pretty face! Jake must be one of those frustratingly direct men with zero social grace. Her fleeting feelings of attraction from earlier vanished.

Her silence confirmed his suspicion—she had no idea how to drive in the game.

The delivery driver was still waiting, and Jake felt bad for making him stand there. But this stubborn woman refused to abandon her ridiculous bush-hiding strategy.

"Fine. Which key makes you stand up and run, and which one drives a vehicle?"

"They're both Shift."

Great. She couldn't even master a single key. This was hopeless.

Jake moved behind her chair, reaching over her shoulders. His left hand hovered over the Shift key, his right taking control of the mouse. The position essentially wrapped her in his arms as he leaned forward.

He pressed Shift and clicked the mouse, making the character rise from the bush and sprint toward a nearby Jeep.

The moment his arms enclosed around her, Fiona felt an electrical current zip through her body. The subtle, crisp scent of his cologne filled her senses—not overpowering, but distinctly masculine and oddly dizzying. She froze, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, afraid he might notice the way her pulse had suddenly accelerated to dangerous speeds.

His chest pressed lightly against her back as he leaned forward, his breath warm against her ear as he concentrated on navigating the game. Had anyone ever been this close to her outside of filming? She couldn't remember. She certainly couldn't remember ever being this acutely aware of someone's proximity—the warmth radiating from his body, the controlled strength in his hands, the slight roughness of his fingertips on the keyboard.

*This is ridiculous*, she told herself. *We're literally being paid to pretend to be a couple, and here I am getting flustered because he's helping me in a video game.*

But her body didn't seem to get the memo. Her cheeks burned, and she prayed the cameras wouldn't catch her sudden flush.

After driving the vehicle to a secluded area, Jake parked, released the keyboard and mouse, and simply said, "There. Now can we get the food?"

Like some spell had been broken, she found herself obediently following him to the door, abandoning her precious game without protest.

"You're—you're Fiona Hart?" The delivery driver's expression transformed from confusion to starstruck awe.

"Yes, that's me. Did you need my phone number?" she asked with her practiced gracious-celebrity smile.

"No, no, not at all." The driver shook his head vigorously and handed the bags to Jake instead. He muttered under his breath, "I guess nobody else could live up to that username anyway."

Then, gathering his courage, he asked, "Would you mind giving me an autograph? I'm a huge fan."

"Of course! But do you have a pen? Where should I sign?"

As she fumbled with the logistics, Jake stood there like some entitled prince, one hand holding the food, the other in his pocket, making no move to help. Just watching her predicament with barely concealed amusement.

*The nerve of this guy!* Fiona fumed internally. Any flutter of attraction she'd felt when his arms were around her evaporated instantly.

"I have a pen!" the driver said eagerly. "Could you sign the corner of my shirt? Is that okay?"

"Sure, no problem." Unlike some celebrities, Fiona had always maintained a down-to-earth relationship with her fans, without pretense or distance. It was why they felt comfortable enough to turn her most embarrassing moments into memes.

She quickly signed her name on his shirt hem. The driver was practically floating with joy. Who could have imagined that a routine delivery would lead to meeting his favorite actress?

As he prepared to leave, a realization dawned on him. Wait—who was this handsome guy standing next to Fiona? He looked vaguely familiar, and they certainly made an attractive couple.

More importantly, they had both emerged from the same apartment. Which meant... his beloved Fiona Hart was dating someone! They were living together!

The devastating realization hit him like a truck. But wait—this seemed like something he'd accidentally discovered. Were they keeping their relationship secret?

Jake noticed the driver's expression shift again, now filled with the wistful resignation of a fan whose dream girl was officially taken, mixed with a protective "you better treat her right" glare.

If he wasn't mistaken, the delivery driver had completely misunderstood the situation. And Jake was now cast as the guy who had "stolen" America's sweetheart.

Before he could explain, the driver pushed both of them back into the apartment and thoughtfully closed the door for them. Through the closing gap, Jake caught the driver's expression—a mixture of urgent secrecy and self-satisfaction at helping preserve their "privacy."

*I'll keep your secret, Fiona!* the driver's expression seemed to say.

"You start eating. I'll join you after I finish my game," Fiona said cheerfully, immediately dumping the food responsibility on Jake and darting back to the gaming room.

Jake opened the delivery bags and surveyed the contents. Well, this was unexpected. For someone with such a polished public image, Fiona had ordered the most aggressively flavored foods possible: extra spicy buffalo wings, loaded garlic fries, and some kind of chili-oil smothered noodles that made his eyes water just looking at them.

As a vocalist, Jake religiously avoided spicy foods. His voice was his instrument, his livelihood, his responsibility to his fans. And these dishes looked like they could strip paint.

He stood at the dining table, staring helplessly at the spicy feast. Eating it might destroy his throat, but not eating would seem rude, especially on a livestream watched by thousands.

The doorbell rang again. More visitors? Production staff maybe?

Not wanting to disturb Fiona's intense bush-camping session, he answered the door himself.

To his surprise, it was another delivery driver with another bag of food. This one handed over the order without fuss and left quickly.

Back at the table, Jake opened the second delivery to find a large grilled chicken salad with prawns, two types of dressing on the side, and a container of non-spicy tomato pasta.

There it was—a complete balanced meal with protein, vegetables, carbs, and even options for the dressing.

Looking at the array of containers spread across the table, Jake felt something unexpected stir in his chest. She'd seemed so careless, so impulsive, and yet she'd thoughtfully ordered food that would protect his voice without him having to ask.

She must have realized during their apple-peeling moment that he'd be avoiding spicy foods. The buffalo wings and chili noodles were for her alone—probably forbidden foods from whatever restrictive diet her management kept her on.

Maybe their meeting at the bar hadn't been some elaborate scheme on her part. Maybe it really was just two people colliding by chance, pushed together by circumstance and now making the best of it.

Jake went to the kitchen for plates, carefully dividing the salad and pasta in half. He suspected she might want some of the non-spicy options too, to balance out the assault of her spicy indulgences.

He had just started eating when a triumphant shout echoed from the gaming room:

"YES! VICTORY! I GOT A WARZONE WIN!"

Apparently, her bush strategy had somehow led to victory. Jake found himself smiling despite himself. This fake relationship was turning out to be... interesting, at the very least.

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"Why did you divide everything in half? Can't finish it all?" Fiona asked suspiciously, eyeing the separated portions of salad and pasta on the table as she bounced into the dining area, still riding the high of her unexpected gaming victory.

"It's a shame if it goes to waste," she added with unexpected disappointment, looking at the divided food on the plate.

Jake found himself surprised that an A-list actress worth millions would be concerned about food waste.

He quickly swallowed his mouthful and explained, "No, I just wasn't sure if this was ordered for me, so I divided it. If you don't want it, I can finish the rest later. Nothing will be wasted."

The regret in her eyes instantly vanished, replaced by her earlier cheerfulness. Somehow, seeing her happy made him feel relieved.

When she opened the container of spicy noodles, an intense aroma filled the air. Truthfully, he didn't particularly enjoy the smell, but his upbringing ensured his expression revealed nothing. Fiona had no idea he disliked the powerful scent.

After her first bite of the spicy noodles, she launched into an enthusiastic sales pitch about their merits, as if she were trying to convince him to try them. Once finished with that topic, she animated switched to recounting how she'd won her game, hands gesturing wildly as she spoke.

Apparently, after Jake had parked the vehicle for her, another player had approached. Fortunately for Fiona, this person completely failed to notice her sitting in the vehicle. The oblivious player had actually escorted her safely to the final circle, where she eventually won by outlasting everyone with her stockpile of medical supplies.

From her tone, this was clearly her first victory in the game, explaining her overwhelming excitement.

Listening to her dorky explanation and bizarre path to victory, combined with her cheeks stuffed with noodles, Jake couldn't help but laugh. His genuine smile transformed his face, eyes curving into perfect crescents.

Fiona froze mid-sentence, her fork suspended halfway to her mouth. Jake Carter was... laughing? A real laugh, not the polite chuckle he used in interviews or the tight smile he'd offered at their press conference. This was full, uninhibited laughter that transformed his entire face from carefully controlled perfection to something gloriously, refreshingly human.

For a moment, she forgot about her noodles, her game victory, even the cameras capturing their every move. All she could see was how the laughter softened the sharp angles of his face, how it created tiny crinkles at the corners of his eyes, how it revealed a small dimple in his right cheek that she'd never noticed before.

*Oh no*, she thought, a wave of panic washing over her. *He's even more attractive when he smiles.*

This wasn't part of the plan. He was supposed to remain the ice prince, the arrogant musician she could easily resist for three months. She wasn't supposed to discover hidden dimensions to him—like his apple-peeling skills, his consideration in ordering food for her vocal cords, or this unexpectedly delightful laugh that made something flutter dangerously in her chest.

Considering Jake the key to her victory, Fiona generously shared some of her buffalo wings and garlic fries with him, placing them in his bowl.

He hesitated briefly, but decided not to dampen her enthusiasm. For the first time ever, he didn't refuse food he disliked when offered, choosing instead to eat it.

"You know what's funny?" she said, finally slowing down on the noodles. "My character in that period drama I just finished literally starves herself in one scene to maintain her 'ethereal beauty.' Meanwhile, I'm over here stuffing my face on national television."

Jake couldn't help but laugh again. "I'm sure your ethereal beauty will survive the buffalo wings."

"Tell that to Meredith. She once slapped a cookie out of my hand at the Golden Globes after-party."

Jake's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously?"

"Yep. Said the cameras were watching and I needed to maintain the illusion that I subsist on dewdrops and moonlight."

"Sounds difficult."

"It is what it is." She shrugged, but Jake caught a flash of something real beneath her casual tone. "The penance for winning an Oscar is apparently eternal hunger. Small price to pay, I guess."

"Is it?" he asked before he could stop himself.

Fiona looked up, momentarily caught off guard by the genuine question. Their eyes met across the table, and for a brief moment, the cameras disappeared. No fake relationship, no PR disaster, no livestream viewers—just two people seeing each other clearly for perhaps the first time.

The air between them seemed to thicken, charged with something Fiona couldn't—wouldn't—name. It was the same electricity she'd felt when his arms had encircled her at the gaming computer, but more intense now that they were face to face, nothing between them but honesty neither of them had anticipated.

She opened her mouth to respond, then seemed to remember where they were. The mask slipped back into place as she grinned and stole a forkful of his pasta.

"Absolutely. Besides, if I behave myself for the next three months of our 'relationship,' Meredith promised I can eat a whole slice of pizza at the wrap party for my next film."

"Generous," Jake said dryly.

"I know, right? I'm living the dream." Her tone was joking, but something in her eyes wasn't.

The conversation shifted to safer topics: the apartment's decor, tomorrow's schedule, whether the show had planted any deliberate challenges to test them. All the while, Jake found himself watching Fiona more carefully, wondering how many layers of performance separated the woman eating spicy noodles across from him from the real Fiona Hart.

And wondering, against his better judgment, if he might eventually get to meet that person.

"So," she said, finally pushing away her empty container, "tomorrow we have that interview with the morning show hosts. We should probably get our story straight about how we met."

"You mean besides you drunkenly accosting me at a bar?"

"Hey!" She pointed her fork at him accusingly. "That's not how it happened!"

Jake raised an eyebrow. "No? Because I distinctly remember you shouting 'Aren't you that singing guy?' before spilling your drink on my shoes."

"That was a calculated move to get your attention," she insisted with mock seriousness. "I call it the Clumsy Meet-Cute."

"Ah yes, very effective. Nothing says 'date material' like ruined Italian leather."

Fiona laughed, and Jake found himself thinking that her real laugh—not the practiced one she used in interviews—was actually quite nice.

"Fine, we'll workshop the origin story," she conceded. "But I refuse to be the only disaster in this relationship. You need some flaws too, Mr. Perfect."

"I have flaws," he protested.

"Name three."

Jake hesitated, trying to think of something that wouldn't damage his public image if repeated. "I... can be too focused on work."

Fiona rolled her eyes. "That's not a flaw, that's a humble brag. 'Oh no, I'm too dedicated and hardworking!'" She mimicked in a deep voice. "Try again."

"I don't like mornings."

"Better, but still weak. Everyone hates mornings."

Jake frowned, genuinely struggling now. His public persona had been carefully crafted for years to appear flawless. Even admitting small imperfections felt dangerous.

Seeing his discomfort, Fiona softened. "How about this—you're terrible at fake relationships."

"What?"

"It's perfect! Specific enough to be believable, but vague enough that it won't hurt your real dating prospects after our contract ends. Plus, it's demonstrably true," she added with a grin.

Against his will, Jake found himself smiling back. "Fine. I'm terrible at fake relationships."

"Awful," she agreed. "Just the worst."

"Spectacularly bad."

"Relationship-challenged."

"A romantic disaster."

They were both laughing now, the earlier tension dissolved. As Jake watched Fiona's eyes crinkle with genuine amusement, he had the strangest feeling that maybe—just maybe—this fake relationship wouldn't be the career nightmare he'd anticipated.

Later that night, after they'd said awkward goodnights and retreated to their separate bedrooms, Fiona lay awake staring at the ceiling. The events of the day replayed in her mind—the apple peeling, the gaming session, the way Jake had laughed at her ridiculous victory story. Somewhere between hating this arrangement and grudgingly accepting it, she'd stumbled into dangerous territory.

She'd enjoyed herself. With Jake Carter, of all people.

Worse, she'd noticed things. The way his hands moved with surprising grace. How his eyes softened when he smiled genuinely. The unexpected thoughtfulness behind his actions.

*This is not happening*, she told herself firmly. *It's just Stockholm Syndrome. Or proximity effect. Or whatever psychological phenomenon makes people develop feelings for their captors.*

Not that Jake was her captor, exactly, but the principle stood. They were stuck together in an artificial situation. Any feelings that emerged would be equally artificial products of circumstance rather than genuine connection.

Still, as sleep finally began to claim her, Fiona couldn't shake the memory of how it felt to be surrounded by his arms, even for those brief moments at the computer. How something had shifted when their eyes met across the dinner table. How his laugh had transformed him from the cold, distant pop star into someone she might actually want to know.

*Three months*, she reminded herself as consciousness slipped away*. I just need to survive three months without doing anything stupid.*

In the room across the hall, Jake lay equally awake, his thoughts a confusing tangle of impressions and unexpected reactions. When his mother had signed this contract, he'd expected three months of uncomfortable pretense with a diva who cared more about her image than anything authentic.

Instead, he'd found himself face to face with a woman who ordered food considerate of his vocal needs while rebelling against her own dietary restrictions. Who played video games with passionate incompetence. Whose laughter seemed to unlock something in his chest he hadn't realized was locked.

*This is a job,* he reminded himself. *A contractual obligation. Nothing more*.

But as he drifted toward sleep, his last conscious thought was to wonder what other surprises Fiona Hart might have in store—and why he was suddenly looking forward to discovering them.  
  
Chapter 4: Game Over, Feelings Begin

Fiona didn't fall for guys like Jake Carter.

That's what she kept telling herself at 3 AM when sleep refused to visit and all she could think about was the way his eyes crinkled when he laughed at her gaming disasters.

But then morning arrived, and she was jolted awake by what sounded like furniture being dragged across hardwood. She groaned, yanking her pillow over her head. Her body felt like it had been hit by a truck—the kind of exhaustion that comes from a night spent overthinking every single interaction with a man who was only pretending to like her because of a contract.

"Not happening," she muttered into her mattress, which felt like quicksand trying to swallow her whole. The exhaustion wasn't just in her body—it lived in her bones, her cells, her DNA. The noise continued, but in her sleep-drunk state, she decided it was probably just her imagination. It's what her mom used to call her "dramatic tendencies" whenever she swore she heard the boogeyman under her bed.

Five more minutes, she bargained with the universe, letting darkness pull her under again.

When Fiona finally dragged herself out of bed, her hair looked like something had nested in it overnight and her mouth tasted like she'd licked the bottom of her shoe. She stumbled out of her bedroom and stopped dead in her tracks.

Jake. Freaking. Carter. In the kitchen. Making breakfast. Looking like he'd walked straight out of a cooking magazine spread.

The sunlight hitting him wasn't fair. It turned his skin golden and caught in his hair in a way that made her stomach do that roller-coaster drop. He moved around the kitchen like he owned it, like this wasn't the most surreal scenario imaginable—America's most eligible bachelor flipping eggs for Hollywood's most disaster-prone actress.

"Sleeping Beauty lives," he said, flashing a smile that should be illegal before 10 AM. "Made you breakfast. Nothing fancy—just avocado toast, those eggs with the runny centers you like, and some fruit." He gestured to the spread with a spatula. "Hungry?"

This is so unfair, she thought. The man looked criminally good in a plain white t-shirt that hugged his shoulders in all the right places and gray sweatpants that hung just low enough on his hips to be distracting. How dare he turn mundane morning activities into scenes worthy of a Nancy Meyers movie?

"This looks..." Like a trap. Like something I could get used to. Like everything I've told myself I don't want. "...incredible. Let me just..." She gestured vaguely toward her face, which she was certain resembled something from The Walking Dead. "I'll be right back."

"Take your time," he said, his voice warm like honey dripping into tea. "I'll wait."

In the bathroom, Fiona splashed cold water on her face and confronted her reflection. The woman staring back at her looked like a stranger—eyes too vulnerable, mouth too ready to smile at a man who was only playing a part. During her insomnia-fueled overthinking session last night, she'd devised The Plan:

1. Option A (most likely): Jake was not interested in her beyond their contractual obligation. Solution: Bury these stupid feelings six feet under and throw away the shovel.

2. Option B (astronomically unlikely): Jake had actual feelings for her. Solution: Run like hell because men like him don't fall for disaster magnets like her unless they have a savior complex or brain damage.

Either way, when this reality TV nightmare ended, she'd have Meredith terminate their agreement faster than you can say "publicity stunt." Then she'd book a first-class ticket to somewhere with no WiFi and strong cocktails. Maybe Bora Bora. Or one of those islands where they don't allow cell phones and make you surrender your devices like contraband at check-in.

The idea that Jake Carter might genuinely like her was laughable. Guys like him didn't go for women who rage-quit video games and kept emergency Pop-Tarts in their designer purses. He might be attracted to Fiona Hart, the actress who looked graceful on red carpets and thanked the Academy with practiced eloquence. But he'd run screaming from the real Fiona—the one who stress-ate Cheetos at 2 AM and named her houseplants after dead poets.

Get your shit together, Hart. She brushed her teeth, ran her fingers through her hopeless hair, and slapped on some moisturizer. Time to face breakfast—and Jake—with her game face on.

The food looked even better up close—eggs with yolks so perfectly runny they should have their own Instagram, toast that had been avocado-ed with surgical precision, and fruit that looked like it had been cut by someone with OCD and excellent knife skills. He'd even squeezed orange juice. Who does that?

"Was someone in here this morning?" she asked, poking her fork into the egg and watching liquid gold cascade over the toast. "I thought I heard the furniture version of Wrestlemania."

"Oh, that," Jake said, suddenly very interested in his own plate. "The show's sponsor delivered another gaming computer—their latest model."

Fiona froze mid-chew. "Are you serious? The producers have that kind of money to throw around? They just casually drop off another gaming setup worth more than my first car?" She whistled low. "Those rigs cost as much as a semester at NYU."

"Better product placement, I guess," Jake said with a shrug that was trying way too hard to be casual. His eyes gave him away though—they had that guilty sparkle people get when they're hiding something good.

Behind the cameras, the crew was having a silent laugh attack. The truth? There was no sponsor generosity happening. At the crack of dawn, Jake had called the executive producer, demanding they get an identical gaming setup delivered ASAP. He'd wired the money himself with strict instructions that everything had to be set up before Fiona dragged her caffeine-deprived carcass out of bed.

"Huh," she said, trying to picture Jake—Mr. Perfect Posture, Mr. Never-a-Hair-Out-of-Place—hunched over a gaming keyboard with Cheeto dust on his fingers. The image was both ridiculous and disturbingly appealing. "Are you planning to use it too?"

His eyes locked onto hers with an intensity that made her forget to chew. "Weren't you planning to play today?"

The question caught her off guard. It felt like being busted for something embarrassing, like when her mom found her secret stash of romance novels hidden under her mattress in high school. "Yeah," she admitted, feeling heat creep into her cheeks. "I wanted to. Once filming starts for Midnight in Manhattan, I won't touch a controller for months."

"Good," he said, his expression softening in a way that made her heart do that stupid fluttering thing that hearts apparently do when they're contemplating terrible decisions. "That game you're obsessed with—it has a duo mode, right? Partner gameplay?" He hesitated, and for a microsecond, Jake Carter looked almost... nervous? "Would it be cool if I joined? I could use the stress relief."

The request came out casual, but there was something beneath the surface—a tiny crack in his perfect façade that made her look twice. Behind his carefully neutral expression, his eyes held hers with a warmth that made her toes curl inside her fuzzy slippers.

"Hell yeah!" The words burst out before her brain's PR department could review them. "I'm actually really good. I'll totally protect you."

The smile that spread across his face wasn't the one she'd seen on billboards or magazine covers. It wasn't the one he used when accepting awards or posing with fans. This one reached his eyes, transforming his whole face into something less perfect but infinitely more real. He looked younger suddenly, like the boy he must have been before fame polished away all his rough edges.

"Will you now?" The amusement in his voice was wrapped in something warmer, something that made her stupid stomach flutter again.

"One hundred percent," she promised with exaggerated seriousness, hand over her heart. "I'll teach you all my pro gamer secrets."

Which would have been a great promise if she actually had any gaming skills worth sharing. The truth? Her entire strategy consisted of hiding in bushes like a scared rabbit while collecting gear she rarely lived long enough to use. She'd developed what her gaming friends online called "a unique approach" to battle royale—a polite way of saying she played like someone's technologically-challenged grandmother.

After demolishing breakfast, they migrated to the gaming room. Fiona couldn't help stealing glances at Jake as he settled into the ergonomic chair beside hers. Something about him changed in this environment. Under the blue glow of the monitor, the polished superstar veneer seemed to melt away. In jeans and a faded t-shirt with the words "Vinyl Revival" across the front, he looked like any other twenty-something guy on a Saturday morning—except, you know, with the bone structure of a Greek god.

"Okay," she said, flipping on both computers with flourish. "Here's the deal. This game isn't about racking up kills like those twelve-year-old Red Bull addicts who play sixteen hours a day. It's about outlasting everyone else."

Jake nodded, his expression thoughtful as he examined the keyboard. "Natural selection, digital edition."

"Exactly!" she beamed, stupidly pleased by his quick uptake. "But here's the twist—'survival of the fittest' in this world means 'person with the best crap.' My strategy is bulletproof: land somewhere quiet as a church on Monday, grab the best gear possible, and avoid other players like they're carrying the plague."

What followed was her TED Talk on gaming cowardice—a master class in bush-hiding and loot-hoarding that had netted her exactly one victory in roughly four hundred attempts. She left that statistic out of her presentation.

Their first ten matches were epic disasters—the Hindenburg of gaming sessions. They spent most of their time crawling through fields on their digital bellies and hiding in bathrooms, only to get slaughtered the second they poked their heads out. With each humiliating defeat, Fiona became less Academy Award winner and more foul-mouthed Jersey girl. F-bombs dropped like rain as she rage-quit her way through game after game.

"That camping asshole! Who sits in a corner for ten minutes waiting for someone to walk by? Get a life, dude!"

"Are you kidding me? I didn't even see that guy! He's practically invisible—is he wearing some kind of Harry Potter cloak?"

"That's such bullshit! My shotgun was literally touching his face!"

Jake said almost nothing during their losing streak, but she could feel him watching—not just the game, but her. He was studying everything: the weapons, the map, the strategy. But mostly, he was watching her come completely unhinged. The carefully constructed image she'd spent years building—Fiona Hart, poised actress and Hollywood darling—was crumbling faster than a cookie in milk, replaced by a cursing, snack-inhaling gremlin who took video games way too seriously.

By their eleventh match, something had changed. Jake selected their landing spot and, the moment they touched down, moved with purpose she hadn't seen before. He scooped up weapons with practiced efficiency—an M416 assault rifle and a 98K sniper rifle.

"Stay with me," he said, his voice taking on a quiet authority that made her do a double-take. There was a new confidence in his tone, almost commanding. "Close. Do exactly what I tell you."

Something in his voice made her snap to attention like a rookie soldier. Gone was her aimless wandering and bush-camping strategy. They moved with purpose, Jake navigating the terrain like he had some kind of mental GPS. When they encountered enemies, his reactions were scary fast and deadly accurate. Headshot. Headshot. Another headshot.

Fiona watched in slack-jawed amazement as Jake systematically demolished every player they encountered, clearing a path to the final circle with an efficiency that seemed impossible for someone who'd supposedly never played this game before.

"What the actual hell?" she finally blurted, unable to contain herself any longer. "Where did you learn to play like this? Are you secretly a professional gamer with a fake identity or something?"

Jake's lips curved into a small, satisfied smile that did dangerous things to her pulse rate. "I pay attention."

As the play zone shrank, forcing the remaining players into tighter quarters, Jake's demeanor transformed. The casual focus hardened into something more intense—a predatory stillness that was somehow both terrifying and ridiculously hot.

"Listen carefully," Jake said, his eyes never leaving the screen. "I'm going in first to clear the zone. Follow me, but stay about twenty meters back. If I get taken down, you'll need room to escape and regroup."

She nodded, suddenly nervous. They'd never made it this far in any previous game. The pressure felt weirdly real, her palms actually sweating on the keyboard.

"Got it! Right behind you! Let's gooooo!" She pumped her fist in the air with all the coordination of a drunk uncle at a wedding.

Jake glanced at her, his intense game face cracking into genuine amusement. She realized with a flash of embarrassment that she sounded like those overly enthusiastic middle schoolers who followed her around at premieres.

"Don't worry," he teased, eyes crinkling at the corners, "I feel very protected."

Her character looked ridiculous next to his sleek, tactical avatar. While Jake's soldier was dressed in practical camouflage, hers wore what could only be described as a fashion disaster: a tactical vest paired with bright pink hot pants and a neon green helmet. She looked like what would happen if a Special Forces unit raided a Claire's accessory store.

"I got you," she promised with dead seriousness, gripping her mouse so hard her knuckles turned white. "Nothing's getting past me."

Her determination was genuine, which made what followed even more mortifying. As Jake moved efficiently toward the final circle, she trailed behind at what she thought was a safe distance. She didn't notice the snake in the grass—literally, an enemy player concealed in the tall weeds to her right. By the time she registered the sound of gunfire, her character was already doing that dramatic slow-motion collapse that meant game over.

"I'm hit!" she yelped, the distress in her voice embarrassingly real for a fake digital death.

Jake's reaction was immediate and unexpected. His character spun around, clearly preparing to race back to her position. But she couldn't let him throw away their best chance at victory.

"Don't you dare!" she commanded, channeling her mother's don't-even-think-about-it voice. "The circle's closing—you'll die in the gas trying to save me." The logical part of her brain overrode the part that desperately wanted to be rescued. "Keep going! At least one of us needs to make it!"

Jake froze, his character going statue-still on screen, caught in indecision.

"Jake, I swear to God," she insisted, her voice rising to a pitch that made dogs in neighboring counties perk up their ears. "Don't you throw this game away for me. Go! Win this thing!"

For a heartbeat, she thought he might ignore her—do the stupid, gallant thing. Then, with visible reluctance that sent an unexpected warmth through her chest, he turned and sprinted toward safety as her character became a digital corpse.

She abandoned her controller and swiveled to watch Jake's screen. His expression had changed, jaw clenched tight enough to crack walnuts, eyes narrowed to laser focus. Was he mad? But why? They were closer to a win than they'd been all day.

What didn't compute—because it had never occurred to her that anyone would value her virtual survival over a victory—was that Jake's scowl had everything to do with leaving her behind, not with potentially losing the game.

With scary intensity, Jake hunted down the remaining players. His movements became surgical, his reaction time almost superhuman. With one clean sniper shot, he eliminated a player hiding behind a tree, the bullet finding its mark between virtual eyes with deadly precision.

Then there were two—Jake and one final opponent.

The circle had contracted to a tiny area centered around a gentle hill. Jake analyzed the terrain like a military strategist, noting that since his opponent wasn't visible, they had to be on the opposite side of the slope.

Without hesitation, he pulled a frag grenade from his inventory, counted under his breath like he was defusing a bomb in an action movie, and lobbed it over the hill with perfect accuracy. The explosion was followed by the most beautiful words in gaming: WINNER WINNER CHICKEN DINNER flashing across their screens in victorious gold letters.

"That was amazing! How did you know to throw that grenade!" She turned to Jake, eyes shining with admiration. "How are you so good at this already? It's like you transformed into a professional gamer right before my eyes!"

If Fiona hadn't been caught up in her excitement, she might have noticed the peculiar way Jake was looking at her—not with the pride of victory, but with a soft wonder, as if her unrestrained happiness was far more fascinating than the game itself.

When she finally calmed enough to sit back down, she turned to him with an impish grin. "Jake Carter, gaming prodigy! As our victorious player who just led us to a win with your brilliant leadership and performance, how do you feel right now? Proud? Accomplished? Ready to quit music and join an esports team?"

Her playful interview manner didn't elicit the pleased response she expected. Instead, Jake's expression remained serious, almost somber.

"I'm not happy, actually."

The blunt admission caught her off-guard. "What? Why not? We won! That's like, the whole point of the game."

Jake turned in his chair to face her directly, his gaze so intent that she felt the smile fade from her face.

"Because I lost you in the process," he said, his voice dropping to that impossibly low register that seemed designed specifically to make her forget how to breathe. "Winning doesn't feel like winning if you don't make it there with me."

The simple statement hung in the air between them, weighted with an implication that she wasn't sure how to interpret. Was this just Jake playing his role for the cameras? Method acting for their fake relationship? Or was there something genuine in the way his eyes held hers, steady and unguarded?

Her brain short-circuited like an overtaxed power grid. Before she could stammer out something coherent, Jake turned back to his screen, the moment passing like a summer storm.

"Let's play another round," he suggested, his voice lighter now. "This time, we both make it to the end."

The next match began with a different dynamic. Jake took the lead, but with a protective rather than dominant energy.

"I'll give you all the equipment I find," he said as their digital avatars plummeted toward the map. "Just tell me what you need. What I have is yours, and what I don't have, I'll find for you."

There was a teasing quality to his voice as he added, "After all, you're supposed to be protecting me, right?"

She laughed, the tension dissolving like sugar in hot coffee. "Absolutely! I'll be your digital bodyguard! No one touches Jake Carter on my watch!"

The irony wasn't lost on either of them. For all her big talk about protection, Jake was the one who consistently had her back—spotting enemies before she saw them, warning her about danger zones, and literally taking bullets that would have otherwise ended her game.

After another impressive match (though not quite a victory), she swiveled in her chair to face him, channeling her inner drama queen.

"Okay, I need to file a complaint," she announced, folding her arms across her chest and fixing him with her best outraged glare. "Weren't you supposed to be the newbie I was protecting? How did this turn into you babysitting me the entire time? My gamer cred is in serious jeopardy here."

She was expecting a laugh, maybe a playful comeback about her questionable gaming skills. What she wasn't prepared for was the way Jake's expression softened, his eyes holding hers with an intensity that made the temperature in the room seem to rise by ten degrees.

"Because we're boyfriend and girlfriend," he said, his voice dropping to a register that seemed to bypass her ears and go straight to her core. "As your boyfriend, isn't protecting my girlfriend what I'm supposed to do?"

The playful atmosphere evaporated instantly. Fiona felt heat rise to her cheeks as the implication of his words sank in. But we're just pretending, her mind protested. This is all for show—a publicity arrangement to save my reputation.

Yet there was something in Jake's expression—an openness, a vulnerability beneath the confident exterior—that made her wonder if they were still acting at all. For a man who had never professionally acted, his performance was remarkably convincing. So convincing that even she, with her years of training and her Academy Award, couldn't discern where the script ended and reality began.

The uncertainty paralyzed her. If she responded in kind and it was just Jake playing his part, she'd be exposing genuine feelings to someone who was merely fulfilling a contract. But if his words held truth and she dismissed them as acting, she might be closing a door she desperately wanted to walk through.

The moment was interrupted by a sudden flicker of the lights overhead. Both of them glanced up, momentarily distracted from the charged atmosphere between them.

"That's weird," Jake murmured, just as the room went completely dark.  
  
Chapter 5: Blackout Truth

"What the—" Fiona yelped, her hand instinctively reaching out and accidentally colliding with Jake's arm.

"Power outage," Jake said calmly, his voice closer than she'd expected in the darkness. Her eyes hadn't adjusted yet, but she could feel his presence, solid and steady beside her. "Stay put. I'll find the breaker box."

"No way am I sitting here alone in the dark like some horror movie victim," she protested, grabbing for what she hoped was his arm and instead finding his hand. She pulled back immediately, the brief contact sending an electric current up her arm that had nothing to do with the power situation.

A beam of light cut through the darkness. Jake had pulled out his phone flashlight. In the harsh white glow, his features looked sharper, more defined—all cheekbones and jawline. "Fine. Come with me then. The breaker's probably in the utility closet near the kitchen."

She followed him through the apartment, keenly aware of the cameras that were now useless without power. For the first time since this whole charade began, they were truly unobserved. The thought sent a flicker of something dangerous through her stomach.

"Do you think this is part of the show?" she whispered as they made their way down the hallway. "Some producer's brilliant idea to manufacture drama?"

Jake's laugh was low and genuine. "If it is, they're idiots. The livestream just went dead without warning. Advertisers hate that."

The utility closet was a cramped space barely big enough for one person, let alone two. As Jake examined the electrical panel, Fiona stood awkwardly in the doorway, trying not to notice how the cramped quarters amplified his scent—something clean and expensive that made her want to lean closer.

"That's weird," Jake muttered, frowning at the breaker panel. "Nothing's tripped." He ran his fingers over the switches, flipping them experimentally back and forth. "This isn't just our apartment. The whole building might be out."

A crash from the living room made them both jump. Fiona instinctively grabbed Jake's arm, her fingers digging into his bicep. "What was that?"

"Probably just something falling over," he said, but his body had tensed. "Stay here."

"Are you insane? Have you never seen a horror movie? We don't split up!" She kept her grip on his arm as they moved cautiously back toward the living room.

The beam from Jake's phone flashlight swept across the room, revealing a fallen lamp. One of the production assistants was crouched beside it, looking sheepish. "Sorry about that," he said. "I was checking the windows to see if other buildings have power."

"And?" Jake asked.

"The whole block's dark. Looks like a neighborhood outage."

The executive producer appeared from the kitchen, his face illuminated eerily from below by his own phone light. "The backup generator should have kicked in for essential equipment," he said, his voice tight with irritation. "Something's wrong with the system. We're going to need to call in technicians."

"So we're off the air?" Fiona asked, trying to keep the hope out of her voice.

"For now," the producer admitted grudgingly. "But we've got handheld cameras with battery packs. We'll switch to those until power's restored."

Jake's eyebrow raised slightly. "You're going to follow us around with handheld cameras in the dark? Sounds like Blair Witch Project meets The Bachelor."

The producer's expression made it clear this wasn't a joking matter. "This is a major production investment. We need footage for today's episode no matter what."

"Actually," Jake interjected, his voice taking on the polite but unyielding tone Fiona had heard him use in interviews when redirecting uncomfortable questions, "I believe our contract has provisions for technical difficulties. Section 12.4 specifically states that in the event of equipment failure, we're entitled to reasonable accommodation time."

The producer's eyes narrowed. "How do you—"

"I read everything I sign," Jake said simply. "Every word."

Fiona tried to mask her surprise. Jake wasn't just a pretty face with a good voice; he was someone who knew exactly what he was getting into and protected himself accordingly. The knowledge shifted something in her perception of him.

"Fine," the producer said after a tense moment. "We'll give you two hours. But when the power's back, we need to make up for lost time."

As the production team retreated to make calls and figure out the power situation, Jake turned to Fiona. "Sorry about that. I don't like being filmed when it's not on the agreed terms."

"Don't apologize," she said, still processing this new side of him. "That was... impressive."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Not all musicians let the industry walk all over them, you know."

"So what do we do with our unexpected freedom?" she asked, suddenly aware of how close they were standing—close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body in the cooling apartment.

"We've got no electricity, no internet, no cameras..." Jake's voice had dropped to that lower register again, the one that seemed to vibrate directly against her skin. "When was the last time you had two hours completely unplugged from the world?"

She couldn't remember. Her life was a constant stream of notifications, calls, messages, and emails. Always performing, always on display. "I don't know," she admitted softly. "Years, maybe?"

Jake's smile in the dim light was conspiratorial. "Then let's make the most of it."

He led her to the kitchen, flashlight scanning the drawers until he found what he was looking for—candles. Not romantic dinner candles, but practical emergency ones stashed by the production team. Within minutes, the apartment was bathed in a warm, flickering glow.

"Better than phone lights," Jake said, setting the last candle on the coffee table. In the candlelight, his features softened, the perfect angles of his face less intimidating, more human. "So, Academy Award winner Fiona Hart, what do you do when nobody's watching?"

The question hit deeper than he probably intended. What did she do when nobody was watching? Did she even know anymore? Her life had been public for so long that the line between her real self and her public persona had blurred beyond recognition.

"I..." she began, then stopped, realizing she had no ready answer. This wasn't a pre-approved interview question with a rehearsed response. "I'm not sure anymore."

Jake's expression shifted, something like recognition flickering across his features. He didn't push, didn't pry—just nodded slightly as if he understood exactly what she meant.

"When I was on my second world tour," he said, settling onto the couch and gesturing for her to join him, "I had a panic attack backstage before a show in Milan. Not the 'I'm nervous' kind—the 'I can't breathe, I think I'm dying' kind."

Fiona sat beside him, drawn by the unexpected vulnerability in his admission. "What happened?"

"My sister found me curled up in a storage closet. She told the audience I had food poisoning, postponed the show, and sat with me for three hours while I tried to remember who I was underneath all the personas I'd created."

The candlelight danced across his face as he spoke, highlighting the earnestness in his eyes. This wasn't a calculated confession designed to make him seem relatably flawed. This was real.

"Did you figure it out?" she asked softly. "Who you are underneath it all?"

Jake's laugh held no humor. "Still working on it. But I found some things that are undeniably me—not the brand, not the image. Just Jake."

"Like what?"

"I play classical piano when I'm stressed—not the pop stuff I do on stage. I still have the stuffed tiger my grandmother gave me before she died. I can't sleep without a fan running, even in winter." Each admission seemed to cost him something, as if he were giving away passwords to locked rooms. "And I'm really, really good at video games because when I was sixteen and suddenly famous, online gaming was the only place people didn't know who I was."

The revelation struck Fiona like a physical blow. So he hadn't been showing off or pretending to be bad at gaming earlier—he'd been hiding how good he really was because it was something true about himself, something precious because it was private.

"Your turn," he said softly. "Tell me something real, Fiona. Something that's not in your press kit."

The request was gentle but weighty. In the golden glow of the candles, with the world temporarily shut out, it felt possible to be honest without consequences. She took a deep breath.

"I have insomnia... the bad kind. Not the cute 'can't sleep' kind they show in movies." The words came out shakier than she intended. "Sometimes I go three, four days barely sleeping. My doctor wanted to prescribe serious medication, but I was afraid of becoming dependent, so I just... deal with it."

Jake's eyes never left her face, his attention complete in a way few people had ever given her. Not evaluating her response for its PR value or its entertainment quality—just listening.

"That's why I game," she continued, the confession gaining momentum. "At 3 AM when my brain won't shut up, shooting virtual enemies is better than lying in bed hating myself for not being able to do the most basic human function."

"What does your brain say at 3 AM?" Jake asked, his voice so gentle it made her throat tighten.

"That I'm a fraud." The words came out before she could filter them. "That someday everyone will realize I'm not special or talented—just lucky. That the real me is disappointing and nobody would pay for a movie ticket to see her."

In the silence that followed her confession, she could hear rain beginning to patter against the windows—a gentle, rhythmic counterpoint to the sound of her own heart pounding. When had it started raining? The weather seemed to be conspiring to make this moment more cinematic, more intimate.

Jake shifted beside her, and for a terrible moment, she thought he might offer platitudes or, worse, pity. Instead, he reached for something on the coffee table—a deck of cards the production team had provided as potential entertainment filler for the show.

"My sister taught me this game," he said, shuffling the deck with surprising dexterity. "It's called Truth or Truth. Like Truth or Dare, but without the dares. The rules are simple—draw a card, and the number is how many seconds you have to think before answering. Face cards mean you have to answer immediately. Aces mean you can ask any question, no matter how personal."

He held the deck out to her like an offering. "No cameras, no audience. Just us. Whatever we say here stays between us. Deal?"

Fiona stared at the cards, understanding the weight of what he was proposing. A game where they could ask anything, where the expectation was honesty without the filter of public perception. It was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

"Deal," she said, taking the deck from his hand. Their fingers brushed momentarily, and even that brief contact sent a tingling awareness up her arm. "But I go first."

She shuffled the cards again, enjoying the satisfying sound of them sliding against each other, before drawing the top card. Seven of diamonds.

"Seven seconds to think," Jake said, watching her intently.

She counted in her head, considering what question would best break the ice without diving too deep too fast. "What's something your fans would be surprised to know about you?"

Jake's lips twitched with amusement. "Starting with an easy one. Smart." He leaned back against the couch cushions, considering. "I hate most of my own music. Especially the early stuff. I was so young when I started, and everyone around me had opinions about what would sell. I'm only now starting to make music I actually want to listen to."

The admission surprised her. "But you've won Grammys. Your songs break streaming records."

His smile was small and a bit sad. "Commercial success doesn't mean artistic satisfaction. Your turn."

He drew a card. Three of clubs.

After three seconds of consideration, he asked, "What's your favorite role you've ever played? Not the one that won awards or made the most money—the one that meant something to you."

Fiona didn't need the three seconds. "Emily in 'Silent Houses,'" she answered immediately. "It barely made back its budget, and critics were split, but I loved her. She was messy and complicated and made terrible decisions, but she was trying her best." She paused, realizing something. "She's the character most like the real me."

Jake nodded, something like understanding in his eyes. "I saw that film. You were... raw in it. Vulnerable in a way that felt real."

"It was real," she admitted quietly. "My mom had just been diagnosed with breast cancer during filming. I was terrified of losing her, angry at the universe, and had to show up on set every day and pretend everything was fine." She swallowed hard against the memory. "I poured all of that into Emily."

"How is your mom now?" Jake asked, genuine concern in his voice.

"Six years cancer-free," Fiona said with a small smile. "But those months of not knowing were the worst of my life."

She drew the next card. Jack of hearts. "Who was your first real love, and what happened?"

Jake's eyebrows rose slightly at the immediately required answer. "Sophia Reyes. High school girlfriend, before the fame. We dated for two years, and I thought she was it for me." His expression softened with the memory. "When my first single hit the charts, everything changed. She tried to stick with me through the craziness, but it was too much too fast. She broke it off right before my first tour."

"Do you ever talk to her?" Fiona asked, curious about this girl who had known him before the world did.

"She's married now. Two kids. Lives in Arizona." A small smile played at his lips. "She sends me a congratulatory text when I win something big. I send her kids birthday presents every year. It's... nice. Uncomplicated."

There was something wistful in his tone that made Fiona wonder if he missed that simplicity—having someone who knew him as just Jake, not Jake Carter the global superstar.

The game continued, each question peeling back another layer. She learned that Jake still got stage fright before every performance, that he'd once punched a paparazzo who'd made his little cousin cry, that he secretly wrote poetry that would never see the light of day. He learned about her childhood in New Jersey, her fear of deep water stemming from a near-drowning at age eight, her collection of vintage movie scripts.

As the candles burned lower and the rain intensified outside, the questions grew deeper. Their voices dropped to near-whispers, as if speaking too loudly might break the fragile bubble of authenticity they'd created.

Jake drew an ace.

His eyes met hers in the flickering light, and something in his expression made her heart stutter. "Are you afraid of this becoming real?" he asked, his voice barely audible above the rain. "Us, I mean."

The question hung between them, impossible to dodge or deflect. In the golden glow of the candles, with no cameras to perform for, no audience to please, Fiona felt the weight of potential honesty pressing on her chest.

Before she could answer, lights flooded the apartment, the sudden brightness startling them both. The power had returned, reality crashing back in without warning.

In an instant, the spell was broken. Fiona squinted against the harsh overhead lights, feeling suddenly exposed—as if she'd been caught doing something forbidden. The phones that had been temporarily silenced by the power outage began pinging with notifications, the outside world demanding immediate attention.

The production team burst in moments later, a flurry of activity and technical jargon. "We're back online in five!" the director shouted, while crew members scrambled to check equipment and reset lighting.

Jake's eyes never left her face, still waiting for an answer she no longer knew how to give. The vulnerability that had seemed possible in the candlelight felt dangerous under fluorescent bulbs.

"I—" she began, but was cut off by Susan rushing in with her phone.

"Three missed calls from Meredith," her assistant reported breathlessly. "There's been a leak about your contract negotiations for Midnight in Manhattan. The studio's publicity team is in damage control mode."

Reality crashed back like a tidal wave. Fiona felt herself sliding back into her public persona—the competent, unflappable actress who didn't let personal feelings interfere with business. "I need to call her back immediately."

She stood, already reaching for her phone, and finally looked back at Jake. The openness in his expression had been replaced by his own mask—the polite, professional musician ready to resume the show.

"We should pick up the game again where we left off," she said, trying to inject lightness into her voice that she didn't feel. "It was just getting interesting."

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "Of course. Whenever you're free."

The moment—whatever it had been—was gone, retreating like a tide pulling back from shore. The cameras reset, the crew returned to their positions, and just like that, they were back to being Jake and Fiona, America's newest celebrity couple, playing their parts for an audience that couldn't see the truth hiding behind their performances.

But as she stepped away to return Meredith's call, Fiona couldn't shake the feeling that something fundamental had shifted between them during those powerless hours. The lines between real and pretend had blurred, leaving her unsure where the script ended and genuine feelings began.

In the privacy of her bedroom, with the door firmly closed against the cameras and chaos, she pressed her back against the wall and closed her eyes. Jake's question echoed in her mind like a persistent melody: Are you afraid of this becoming real?

Yes, she wanted to say. I'm terrified.

Because the truth was far more frightening than any manufactured reality show drama: somewhere between the gaming and the candlelight confessions, Fiona Hart—who didn't fall for guys like Jake Carter—was falling anyway.

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When she returned to the living room thirty minutes later, having smoothed over the contract leak situation with Meredith, Jake was back at the gaming setup. He glanced up as she entered, his expression carefully neutral.

"Everything okay?"

"Just the usual industry drama," she said with a forced casualness. "Nothing Meredith can't handle."

The cameras were rolling again. The crew had positioned themselves around the gaming area, ready to capture their interaction. The intimacy of their candle-lit conversation felt like a dream—something that had happened to different people in a different world.

"Ready to get back to gaming?" Jake asked, gesturing to her chair. "I was thinking we could try a different approach this time."

She settled into her seat, hyperaware of the cameras tracking her every move. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking," he said, his voice taking on that confident, almost teacherly tone from earlier, "that we could switch roles. You be the aggressor, and I'll be your support. Show me what you've learned."

The challenge in his eyes was unmistakable. He was offering her a chance to prove herself, to be more than the bush-hiding coward she'd confessed to being. But there was something else there too—a silent acknowledgment of their interrupted conversation, an offering of a different kind of trust.

"You might regret that," she warned, reaching for her controller with newfound determination. "I'm a quick study."

His smile was genuine this time, cracking through the professional veneer. "I'm counting on it."

As they launched into their next game, Fiona found herself playing differently. Instead of hiding from confrontation, she rushed toward it. Instead of second-guessing every move, she made decisions with confidence, trusting her instincts. And most significantly, instead of playing for herself, she played for them as a team.

Jake matched her step for step, following her lead even when she made questionable choices, backing her up when she took risks. They moved in sync as if they'd been gaming together for years rather than hours.

When Fiona scored her first legitimate kill—a clean headshot on an opponent who never saw her coming—she let out a whoop of triumph that made the sound technician wince and adjust his levels.

"Did you see that?" she demanded, turning to Jake with unfiltered excitement. "Right between the eyes!"

"I saw," he confirmed, and there was something like pride in his expression. "Told you I feel protected."

Their in-game characters crouched behind a rock formation, preparing for the next push into enemy territory. On impulse, Fiona made her character perform one of the game's silly dance emotes, a ridiculous hip-shaking move that looked absurd on her tactical soldier.

Jake's character immediately joined in with an equally ridiculous robot dance, their digital avatars having a momentary dance party in the middle of a virtual warzone.

Fiona's laughter bubbled up, genuine and unrestrained. "We're going to get sniped because we're dancing like idiots."

"Worth it," Jake said, his own laugh joining hers. In that moment, with their shared amusement creating a private bubble around them despite the cameras, something clicked into place.

This wasn't just about the game anymore. It wasn't even about the show or their contract or public perception. This was about two people finding unexpected connection in the most artificial of circumstances.

As they continued playing, evening settled over the apartment. Outside, the rain had intensified into a proper storm, lightning occasionally illuminating the windows and thunder rumbling in the distance. Inside, despite the bright lights and camera crew, Fiona felt cocooned in a strange bubble of authenticity with Jake—a world where their digital avatars battled virtual enemies while something far more complex developed between their real selves.

During a brief break between matches, Jake leaned over, his voice low enough that the boom mic wouldn't catch it. "You never answered my question from earlier."

She knew exactly which question he meant. The one that had been rattling around in her head since the power returned. Are you afraid of this becoming real?

Before she could respond, the lights flickered again—once, twice. The production team let out a collective groan as the apartment plunged back into darkness.

"You've got to be kidding me," the director muttered, the beam of his phone flashlight slicing through the sudden dark. "Someone get on the phone with the building manager. This is completely unacceptable."

In the chaos of production assistants scrambling for flashlights and producers making urgent calls, Fiona felt Jake's hand find hers under the desk, out of sight of anyone who might be watching. His fingers twined with hers, the touch sending a jolt of electricity up her arm.

"To answer your question," she whispered, grateful for the darkness that hid her expression, "yes. I'm terrified."

His grip tightened slightly. "Me too," he admitted, his voice barely audible. "But I'm more afraid of pretending there's nothing here when we both know there is."

For a moment, the honesty between them felt more real than anything Fiona had experienced in years. No lines to remember, no marks to hit, no audience to please—just two people acknowledging a truth they'd both been trying to ignore.

The generator kicked in moments later, emergency lights casting the room in a dim amber glow. Jake released her hand as the crew reset for the second time, but something had changed. The pretense was slipping, reality bleeding through the carefully constructed facade they'd both been maintaining.

When the director announced they were calling it a night due to the unstable power situation, Fiona felt both relief and disappointment. As the crew packed up their equipment, Jake moved beside her again.

"Our game of Truth or Truth isn't finished," he reminded her, his voice holding a promise that made her heart accelerate. "We still have half a deck left."

She glanced around at the departing crew members, aware they'd have precious few moments of privacy once everyone left. The cameras might be off, but the contract dictating their relationship was still very much in effect.

"Jake," she began, uncertainty coloring her voice, "whatever this is—whatever we're feeling—it complicates everything."

His eyes held hers steadily. "I know. But I'd rather navigate complicated reality than live in a comfortable lie. Wouldn't you?"

The question hung between them, weighted with possibility. Before she could answer, the producer approached, tablet in hand.

"We've rescheduled tomorrow's shoot. Given the power issues, we'll be focusing on your individual interview segments in the morning, then moving to the cooking challenge in the afternoon." He glanced between them, oblivious to the tension vibrating in the air. "Any questions?"

"No," they answered in unison, the synchronicity making them exchange a brief, meaningful look.

As the last crew member left and the door closed behind them, Fiona and Jake stood facing each other in the dimly lit apartment. The emergency lights cast long shadows across the floor, the rain still pattering against the windows creating a soothing background rhythm.

"So," Jake said softly, taking a step closer. "Truth or truth?"

Fiona took a deep breath, feeling like she was standing on the edge of a cliff. Jumping meant risking everything—her carefully maintained public image, the contract, possibly even her heart. Not jumping meant living with the question of what might have been.

"Truth," she whispered, choosing to leap.

Jake's smile was slow and genuine, reaching his eyes in a way that transformed his face from handsome to breathtaking. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a single playing card, holding it up between them.

Ace of hearts.

"Perfect," he said.