



Chapter One

“Let’s loosen the top just a bit more. Let one side drop off the shoulder.”

Vanessa shifted her position on the white leather couch slightly, reclining on her left elbow. She reached across with her right hand and slid the red silk blouse off her left shoulder, letting it rest just above the elbow. As she gazed at the bottom of the blouse, making sure it was still covering the vital area, she carefully moved one bare leg over the other. She took in a deep breath, slowly releasing it. She looked at the photographer and then favoured him with a hesitant smile.

* * * *

A month ago, she had gone shopping with her friend Kelly on a Saturday afternoon. Carrying their purchases, they stopped at a coffee shop before going home. They sat down in the large easy chairs by the window, people watching as they chatted.

Kelly took a sip of her coffee and smiled at Vanessa. “So how is the office lately? Did he ask you out for lunch again?”

“It’s not like he’s asking me on a date. We’re just friends.”

“Oh yeah? Just how good a friend?” She gave Vanessa a grin.

Vanessa let out a sigh. “We were talking about apartments and how expensive they were when he mentioned he was getting annoyed with his roommate.” She raised her eyebrows. “It turns out his roommate is a nineteen-year-old *male*. He said something about being obligated to let him stay in his apartment until he found a place of his own.”

“Oh my God. No wonder you get along with him so well. He’s a substitute girlfriend. Does he act gay at all?”

“No, he dresses like a normal guy and I got the impression he had gone out with women before, but maybe that was during his identity confusion stage. Anyway, I’ve been able to relax a bit more with him now that I know he’s not interested in me that way and let him know some of the problems I’ve been having with Matthew.”

“Hey, isn’t that Jimmy at the counter? You know, the guy at Rosie’s with the scars on his face.” Kelly began to brush long blonde hair from her face.

Vanessa looked. “Yeah, that’s him. He looks different with a sports jacket on.” She could only see the side of the tall, slim man, but the one feature on his face stood out.

“Maybe he has a date.”

“He’s looking our way.” Vanessa waved.

Jimmy took a moment to respond to them but then walked over with his cup of coffee. “So this is where you two hide out when you’re not in the bar.” He gave a small lopsided smile, distorted where the scars on his left cheek pulled at the muscles.

“Care to join us? We were shopping.” Kelly moved her bags away from an empty chair.

“Sure, if you don’t mind.”

“You’re dressed up. Going on a date?”

“Uh, no. I just finished a meeting with a client.” He held up a leather portfolio case. “I’m a photographer on the side.”

“Really? Can we see?” Vanessa sat up straight in her chair.

“Sure, if you want. These are just samples I showed her.”

Vanessa and Kelly looked at the photos, some were landscapes but most were women posing in a romantic setting.

“You do a lot of boudoir photography?” Vanessa looked at a soft focus of a woman reclining in a chair.

“Some. It was what the client was interested in.”

“You do good work.” She studied him for a second, deciding he looked a lot different when he was in the bar in his t-shirts and jeans. His dark brown eyes matched the colour of his carefully combed hair. The eyes, she decided, had an intensity to them that would be good in photography.

“Thanks.” He looked at Vanessa for a long moment as if gathering his courage. “Would you like to have your picture taken sometime?”

Vanessa looked down quickly to the photographs and then back to Jimmy. “Me? Oh no, I have never posed for pictures.” She passed the portfolio to Kelly.

Kelly looked through a few of the pictures. “You should Vanessa. Do the whole glamour thing.”

Vanessa shook her head, “It’s a nice thought, but I don’t have money for that type of thing.”

Kelly passed the portfolio back to Jimmy. “How much do you charge?”

“I can give you a special deal. The pictures you see there are the ones I took, but I’m still learning some techniques. My sister actually owns the studio and has been helping me develop the pictures. So for you, I’d do it at cost. All you have to pay for is the supplies.”

“I dunno. I’ll have to think about it.” Vanessa tried to picture herself posing as one of the women did in the picture, wondering what it would be like.

They chatted about other subjects, but as Jimmy finished his coffee, he made one more pitch. “Please think about those photographs. I think you will make a great subject and I would really like to take your picture.” He stood and gave her his card. “Please call me.”

* * * *

“So why don’t you do it?”

Vanessa carried the phone from the living room where she watching TV with Matthew to the kitchen, talking in a soft voice. “Because, because, Kelly, I’m not sure I want to. I just haven’t ever done anything like that before.”

“Don’t you want to? This from the girl who danced topless at a party two years ago?”

Vanessa laughed, “I was pretty drunk back at that time. I’ve been good since.”

“Too good, ever since you’ve been with Matthew. You gotta let your hair down now and then.”

“I still can have fun.”

“Right. Then have those photos done.”

“I’ll think about. Honest.” Vanessa thought Kelly with her tall, slim figure would be better for posing than her own slightly shorter frame with more generous curves.

“Your one-year anniversary of moving in with Matthew is coming up. Why don’t you give him the pictures as a gift?”

“Hmm, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Men love that kind of stuff. Maybe it’ll loosen him up some.”

* * * *

Vanessa met with Jimmy at the same coffee shop they bumped into last time.

“I was thinking of having the photos done on a weekday. That way, it would be the easiest way to get them done without Matthew finding out.”

“No problem. How about I pick you up from your apartment so you don’t have to worry about getting down there?”

“Thanks, but Kelly said she would drive me there. What should I bring to wear?”

“Whatever you feel good in. Bring a variety with you and we can make a decision on them as we shoot. You never know what will work. By the way, try to avoid tight-fitting clothes and underwear when dressing that morning. The elastic has a tendency to leave marks on the skin.”

Vanessa nodded. “Got it. I have a few things I can bring.”

“Good. I think you’ll have fun doing this.”

* * * *

The day had started normally for the first hour—she showered, dressed, gave Matthew a kiss and headed out the door to catch a bus to go to work. Except that instead of going to the bus stop, Vanessa went to the coffee shop down the street and waited by the window for Matthew’s blue ford to go by. She then returned to the apartment, phoned work to say she was sick before undressing again.

She finally called Kelly, telling her the coast was clear.

“Alright, I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Vanessa carefully redid her make up, even powdering her chest, and then brushed her reddish, brown hair. She stood in front of the mirror, looking at herself with a critical eye as she lifted up on her toes pretending to wear high heels. She filled her lungs with air to pull in her stomach and squared her shoulders, pleased that at twenty-seven years her breasts weren’t significantly sagging yet despite being “more than a handful” as Matthew would say.

This will have to do. I’m not getting any younger.

She put on a pair of loose-fitting jeans and a simple t-shirt and then added a jacket in case she met someone in the apartment building. She packed several clothing items in a sports bag, including underwear to wear after the shoot was over. As she took the elevator down to the main floor, she tried to keep calm and not feel anxious that she wasn’t wearing any underwear.

Kelly appraised her as she got in her Subaru. “Hair done, makeup...going on a date?”

Vanessa laughed. “You know Matthew never even noticed I got my hair done.”

“Maybe he won’t notice your hair in the pictures either.”

Kelly walked her into the studio and when she saw there was a receptionist as well as Jimmy's sister, she decided she was safe enough to be left there with Jimmy.

"Call me if you need a ride back."

"Okay, but I think I'll take a cab back."

"Then call me and let me know how the session goes."

Vanessa laughed, "Maybe you should stay and have your pictures done, too."

"Another time. I'm having a bad hair day."

"That looks great. Just point your feet a bit."

She increased her smile as she stretched her feet out, now remembering what he told her before about how to make her legs look longer. The poster bed had soft pink linen and several soft pillows. Around the top and one side of the bed, a fake wall was covered with cream-coloured, textured wallpaper. She looked at him bent over the camera, adjusting the lens. She had seen more samples of pictures he had taken before. They were really quite good. He admitted he still was on a learning curve and had to study each shot before he took it.

She heard the click of the shutter.

He looked up at her, "I really liked that one. How about one on your back, but now with the blouse unbuttoned?"

She hesitated before she answered, "Okay. How long have you been into taking pictures?" She carefully slid onto her back, holding her blouse down past her hips, and then undid the rest of the buttons. She lifted her knee closest to him.

"Only a few years. I told you my older sister is a professional photographer and so I borrowed some of this equipment from her. Gradually I'm buying more stuff, mostly used. Eventually I hope I can make a bit of money doing this."

"I'm sure you will. You're very careful how you work."

"Thanks." He walked over to a light and adjusted its position.

Vanessa watched him move, noticing that he had a good body and probably worked out. It was a feature likely lost on a lot of women. The left side of his face bore scars of a serious burn injury when he was a kid and that stopped a lot of interest in him.

She had known him only as Jimmy for the past two years and had exchanged only short conversations with him at the local pub Matthew and she frequented. But she liked him from the start, noticing he had a nice, deep voice and was smart in his conversations. The scar didn't concern her much, mostly because she was with Matthew she wasn't looking at him as a possible partner.

Jimmy stood on a small stool and took a picture of her from above. "Beautiful."

Vanessa pulled her blouse closed. "Should I put something else on now?"

"Sure, whatever you like."

Vanessa went to the dressing room and picked out lingerie she purchased for the photo shoot. The white bodice was ribbed and she had trouble reaching to do the back clips but was satisfied how it looked once it was done up, noticing how her breasts were made to look fuller as they were pressed upwards. She carefully pulled up the stockings to the garter belt, thinking that would be the worst time to get a run on them, and then slipped on her stilettos. She pivoted in front of the mirror, pleased how it looked, though

wondered if she should let him take a picture of her back while she was wearing a thong. She took a deep breath and ventured back out to where he was waiting.

He looked slightly unsettled as he took several photos as she moved to different positions. “How about one from the back?”

“I don’t know. My whole ass is visible.” She gave a nervous giggle.

“Then how about a three-quarter pose, catch only part of the back?”

“Okay, that would be alright, I guess.”

He clicked the shutter several times. “That looks great. Do you want to put something else on?”

“No, I think that was everything.”

“How about those jeans you came in?”

“Okay, if you think it would look okay. What top should I wear?”

“Just that white tank top, it doesn’t matter. I was thinking of just the jeans and your bare back.”

“Hmm, okay.”

She took off the lingerie, except for the panties, before sliding on the loose-fitting jeans. She slipped her shirt on and returned to the photo set where he was fidgeting with his camera.

“Okay, now what?”

“Pretend you’re putting on your shirt, arms above your head.”

Vanessa turned around and lifted the shirt above her head along her arms. “How’s that?”

“Good, but how about undoing your jeans so they sit real low on your hips?”

“Sure, I can do that.” She loosened her jeans to the point where the top of her cheeks and her thong were exposed and then raised her arms again.

“Great, two more shots and hold it.”

She heard the shutter and then relaxed. “Is that it?”

“How about without the shirt? I would like you to turn around and cross your arms in front.”

Vanessa was quiet for several seconds. “Alright, but that as far as I go.” She tossed her shirt to the side and crossed her arms in front of her before turning around. She knew her jeans were sitting low and showing a lot and hoped they wouldn’t fall to her knees as she pulled in her stomach. Suddenly, she felt like dropping her arms to her sides and letting him have one picture of her topless, picturing the surprised look on his face.

“Very nice, great.” Jimmy spoke as he looked in the camera before squeezing the shutter. He looked up. “That will be it. Are you sure you don’t want to have one shot with your hands above your head like that?”

Vanessa relaxed her arms for a moment, smiling. “I don’t know. This is pretty wild for me.”

He gave a small grin. “Come on. You’re a natural. Look, I’ll tell you what. If you don’t like the pictures, we can get rid of them.”

She laughed, “You better behave yourself then.” She turned around and raised her arms above her head. As she heard the camera shutter, she slowly pivoted around and ended up facing him with her fingers lifting her hair.

“Very nice.” He looked up from his camera. “How about lying on your back?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. She turned to the bed and relaxed on her back with her hands above her head.

Again, he stood on a stool to take her pictures. She peered at the black eye of the lens staring down on her.

He whispered, a hint of pleading in his voice, "Your jeans?"

Vanessa didn't reply, merely pushing her jeans down with her hands as she curled up her legs. When they reached her ankles, she slipped them off and then let them drop off the side of the bed. She stretched out as he resumed his picture taking, rolling over on to her stomach and then her back again. She heard him take deep breaths and then as the shutter slowed to a stop, she sat up.

"Satisfied?"

"Very."

"Good." She stood and just before she disappeared into the dressing room, turned around to give him a smile.

He called out after her. "Thank you."

She didn't reply, quickly putting on her jeans and shirt, before staring at herself in the mirror. A smile slowly creased her face. *I did it.*

* * * *

Jimmy drove her slowly back to her apartment in his pickup truck. She, also, noticed the truck was clean inside and out, as if it just gone to a car detailer.

"Nice car. Always keep it this clean?"

His face redden just slightly as if he was caught stealing a cookie. "No, it's usually clean but I just had it washed."

"What do you do exactly, besides the photography?"

"I'm a partner in a construction company. We specialize in commercial projects."

"Oh, so you can take time off when you want to take pictures?" She gave him a grin.

"Not always. Sometimes I work twelve-hour days. Right now, we're at a quiet time during a couple of projects, so it was a great time to take your picture."

"Thanks again for taking my picture. I'm looking forward to seeing them." She looked at the apartment front door in case anyone was there to see her get out of his truck.

"They'll be ready next week. Do you want me to call you then?"

She thought about giving him her mobile number and then changed her mind, not wanting Matthew to wonder about a strange phone call. "Call me at work and we can arrange to get together then." She dug into her purse and wrote out her number on a piece of paper.

He carefully folded the paper and put it in his wallet. "Okay, I'll call as soon as they're ready."

She stepped out of the car, "Bye, thanks again."

"Anytime, Vanessa."

She opened the door to the apartment building and turned around to see the truck just leave the curb.

When she reached her apartment, she immediately phoned Kelly.

"So how did it go?"

"Pretty good, I think. I was real nervous at first, but after a while, I felt okay."

“You felt okay being with him?”

“Yeah, he was really nice throughout the session. I have the impression he has a bit of a crush on me, just some things he did.”

“No surprise there. Notice he offered to take your pictures but not mine?”

“I never thought of that.”

“He watches you with hungry eyes. I don’t think he has a girlfriend. Maybe that scares them away.”

“Funny, after I spend most of the day with, I didn’t really notice it as much. I think he works out because his body looks muscular.”

“Hey don’t start having an affair with him. But if you do, I want all the details.”

She laughed, “Not me. I have enough in my life right now.”

Chapter Two

Vanessa pushed the file folder to a vacant part of her desk and then clicked a few keys on the keyboard.

“Hey, want to go for coffee?” Ben poked his head around the partition of her cubicle.

She looked up from her desk at Ben. Vanessa smiled at him. She thought he looked like one of the actors from the old black and white movies, with his classic square jaw, steel grey eyes, black hair and a white-teeth smile.

“I desperately need one.” She grabbed her purse and walked with him to the elevators.

The elevator took them to the second floor where various shops were located in the office tower.

“I’ll buy you a coffee since you rescued me from my cubicle of paperwork.” Vanessa grinned and then carried their coffees to the side counter.

Ben looked at her as she poured sugar into her coffee. “You should try it without sugar. It’s not bad coffee here.”

“I need the energy boost.” She looked at him and grinned. “Shut up. I know all about the evils of sugar.”

Vanessa told him about the extra work dumped on her lap since one of their co-workers left on maternity leave. “It looks like they’re going to take their sweet time hiring someone to cover her, too.”

“Hiring always takes time. But I’d say everyone knows you’re doing a great job covering.”

“Thanks.”

“So how’s life outside the office going?”

“Okay. Same old. Except, well, I...” Her voice tailed off.

“What is it? You joined a cult?”

Vanessa laughed. “No. Just that I had my picture taken. It’s a surprise for Matthew. I’m going to make up a calendar of myself.” She waited for him to make a joke about it.

“That’s a great idea. Good for you.” He reached over and briefly touched her hand. “It’s nice to hear you have a bit of fun outside the office.”

“Thanks, Ben, for your encouragement. You always seem to find the right thing to say to me.”

He laughed. “Hey, if you ever want to hear more of my words of wisdom, come down to Sidecar on Thursday nights. I jam there with my buddies.”

“I didn’t know you played in a band. I’d like to come down sometime.”

“Band is a generous term. Right now we’re just having fun.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pen and wrote on the back of his business card. “Here’s my cell number. Call me ahead of time and I’ll reserve a table for you. I might even throw in a drink or two.”

She stared at the card. “Okay, I might do that.”

Chapter Three

Matthew pushed open the door to their apartment, dropping his briefcase by the door.

“Hi, how was your day?” Vanessa smiled at him.

“Bit of bad news I’m afraid. It looks like we lost one of our big accounts.”

“Oh that’s too bad.” She walked over and gave him a hug. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Sure, I need a drink.”

She opened a bottle, struggling with the cork and then poured two glasses. She carried the glasses into the living room as he dropped himself on an easy chair, turning on the TV.

“Thanks. Hey, I’m going to meet the guys at Cliff’s. There’s a game on tonight. Would you like to join me?”

Vanessa sighed. “No, you go ahead. I don’t care much for football.”

“You don’t mind, do you? You sound a bit upset.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I just wanted to spend the evening with you.”

“I’ll try not to be out too late.”

“That’s okay, you have a good time.” She gave him a smile, noticing he was definitely developing a stomach. His weight had steadily increased after he was promoted to a desk job. He was tall enough to carry some of the extra weight and still kept his blond hair neat, though his face was getting a bit puffy.

* * * *

“Vanessa speaking.”

“Hi, it’s me Jimmy.”

“Oh, hi. Did you get the pictures done already?”

“Yup, they’re finished. I think you’ll like them.”

“Great. When can I meet you?”

“How about for lunch? There’s Clive’s Steakhouse close by to where you work.”

“Okay. But it’ll be my treat.”

“Oh no, it’s my suggestion so I’ll buy.”

“We’ll discuss that later. I’ll meet you there at twelve.”

Vanessa slowly hung up the phone. She detected the eagerness in his voice but wasn’t sure if that was due to wanting to show off the photos he took or to meet her for lunch. She knew he was interested in her but wasn’t sure how strong it was. It was a good feeling that another man fancied her, but she certainly didn’t need another complication in her life.

She worked through the items in her in-basket without awareness, her mind on the photos. She left early and headed to the restaurant, only a block and a half away, arriving ten minutes early.

The receptionist took her name and informed her Jimmy was already waiting at their table. She was escorted to the table where Jimmy greeted her as he stood up.

Vanessa ordered just a salad and then looked at him expectantly. “So you have the pictures?”

“I do.” He took out a large envelope from his case. “Here they are.”

Vanessa looked around her before she reached inside and slid out the eight-by-ten-inch photos.

“These are great. I don’t like my smile on this one or my eyes here, but they’re really good photos.”

“Good subject.”

“Thanks. I really like these pictures of me. They turned out better than I thought. So I should pick out the best ones and use them for the calendar?”

“Yeah, twelve or six. You can use one picture for two the months if you like.”

“Okay, I think six will be better.” She began to sort out the pictures. “Actually, maybe twelve.” She gave a smile to him. “These make me look really good.”

“They don’t. You really do look like that.”

Vanessa heard the slight intensity in his voice and blushed. “Jimmy, I’m doing these pictures for Matthew, to give to him as a gift as sort of an anniversary present. I like you, Jimmy, but I want to have you as a friend. I have Matthew as a partner.”

“He’s a lucky man.”

“Thanks. I don’t want you to misunderstand why I posed.”

“That’s okay, I understand.” He gave a weak smile. “I admit my intentions weren’t entirely pure and that I enjoyed spending time with you. But I don’t want to cause you any distress and I won’t make any advances towards you. I know you’re with him. I’m content just to know you.”

“Alright.” She raised her cup of coffee. “To friends.”

“To friends.” Jimmy lifted his wine glass.

“So how do I get these changed into a calendar?”

“These pictures will be yours anyway. I just need to copy the number of the pictures in the order you want them to show on the calendar. I still have the negatives and the print shop will use those to print the calendar. I’ll give you the negatives and the calendar next week sometime.”

“How much to I owe you?” She began to sort through the pictures in the order she wanted.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. We’ll talk about that next week.”

“So which one of these photos is your favourite?”

He pushed towards to the middle of the stack and pulled out a picture. “That one.”

She was surprised. It wasn’t one where she was lying topless on the bed or wearing lingerie. Rather, it was the one where she was wearing just her jeans with her arms crossed to cover her breasts. She looked at her face, a nervous appearance with a vulnerable look. She appeared in the photo as she felt at that very moment, wondering if she should lift her arms up but was too shy to do so. It would have been a great picture, but it exposed her more than she was ready to at that moment.

Vanessa reached into her purse and took out a pen. She wrote on the picture “To Jimmy, my favourite photographer,” and then signed her name.

She passed over the picture. “Here. Thanks for everything.”

He carefully took the picture and read the inscription. “I’ll have to frame that one.”

“I better get going. Call me next week, okay?” She waved at the waitress.

“Okay.”

The waitress stopped at her table with a coffee decanter.

“No, thank you, just the bill, please.”

“There isn’t one. He has already made arrangements to cover it.” She gave her a smile and then looked at Jimmy.

“Jimmy, I was to pay for lunch.” She tried and failed to look exasperated at him. “Another time. My treat.”

She stood and wagged a finger at him. “You’re not to be trusted.”

He stood as well. “Would you like me to walk you back to your office?”

“No, thanks. Finish your wine.” She stepped around the table and gave him a hug. “See you later.”

* * * *

Matthew studied his coffee as he spoke to Vanessa. “I think I will be looking for another job soon. The fallout of losing a big client is going to claim a few victims.”

“But it wasn’t your fault they left. How could you lose your job when something like that happened?”

“I know. But the loss in revenue means they could be restructuring, as they call it now. I’m one of the least-experienced sales reps so I suspect I could be on the outside looking in.”

“Well, if comes to that, I know you’ll find another job soon enough.”

“I hope so. Anyway, I’m going to put out a few feelers right away, maybe I’ll have a chance to leave with a new job waiting for me.”

“Matthew, I know we keep our separate bank accounts and split the expenses, but if you want, I can take over the apartment rent for the time being.”

He gave her a smile. “Thank you, that’s nice to hear. I do have some savings so I think I’ll be okay regardless.” He reached over and squeezed her hand. “You know, it’s going to be one year since you moved in here with me next week. I thought it would be nice if we went for a quiet dinner.”

“That sounds great, but maybe we should save our money instead.”

“Oh no, don’t think that way. My treat, of course. Besides, I already made the reservations.”

She smiled at him. “You really do care about us, don’t you?”

“You’re the light of my life.”

Chapter Four

Vanessa met with Jimmy for lunch again, though this time insisted that she be given the bill before they even ordered. "You tricked me last time. Now, it's definitely my turn to buy."

He shrugged and gave her a smile. "Alright then, if you insist." He passed over two large envelopes. "One has the calendars, there are two copies, and the other contains a set of pictures plus the negatives."

She pulled out a calendar and flipped through the pages. "Oh, this looks so professional. The paper and the look to it are so nice. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome."

"Now, how much do I owe you? And don't lie to me about the costs either."

"Don't worry about it. You gave me a chance to try my skills as a photographer. Call it even."

"No way. I know the printer charged you money for the calendar. How much was that?"

"Nothing really. He does work for me all the time. A few prints for a calendar is really nothing for him."

"Jimmy..."

"You're buying me lunch. That's good enough."

"I'm going to get even with you. If you won't take my money, I'll figure something else out."

"You could always pose for me again."

"I had fun doing the calendar, but I think it'll be a long time before I do these kind of pictures again."

* * * *

Ben grinned at her. "So what's the big news that you had to drag me to lunch?"

Vanessa held up a large yellow envelope and waved it back and forth. "I got my calendar done and it looks great."

He put down his sandwich and stared at the envelope. "That's great to hear. Are you going to show them to me?"

She gave a shy smile. "Well, I guess I could show them to you. Most guys I wouldn't, but you're special."

"Thanks." He reached for the envelope.

Vanessa placed the envelope on the table. "Look at them after lunch. I don't want any fingerprints on the pictures."

"I have some news as well."

"What? You bought that new car you were talking about?"

He shook his head. "No, I have the apartment to myself again. Curtis is moving out."

Vanessa dropped her shoulders and reached for his hand. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that things didn't work out."

Ben shrugged. "That's okay. He's moving in with some girl he met a few weeks ago. He paid some rent but used at least that much in groceries and beer."

"He dumped you for a girl?"

Ben sat back and squinted his eyes at her. “Dumped me? He was my younger cousin from the coast and needed a place to stay for a couple months. Did you think we were a couple?”

Vanessa covered her mouth. “Oh my God. I thought you were gay.”

He stared at her and then burst into laughter. “Unbelievable. Me? Gay? Because I had my cousin stay with me?”

“Sorry, I misinterpreted what you said at one time.” She blushed.

He chuckled and then reached for the envelope.

“No!” She grabbed the envelope from him.

“I thought you said I could look at them.”

“That was before—when I thought you were gay.”

“Damn, I should have kept that secret a bit longer.”

She gave him a grin and thought how mad he would be if he knew she had told all the women in the office that he was actually gay.

They walked out of the restaurant and he grabbed her hand, looking at her when she stopped.

“I can’t believe you thought I was gay. Why did you think I always was asking you for coffee and lunch?”

“I don’t know. Just to talk. You knew I was living with Matthew.”

“You were always complaining about him. I thought you were telling me you were looking for someone else.” He laughed. “I think we both talked but didn’t listen very well.”

Vanessa laughed. “Talk about mixed signals.”

Ben leaned into her, kissing her full on the lips. He stepped back. “There, I think I cleared up the mixed signals here.” They began to walk back to the office again.

She touched her lips with her fingers, still feeling the tingle.

* * * *

The dinner at Chris’s Steakhouse was excellent and Vanessa waited until they had finished desert before eagerly presenting the calendar to him, carefully wrapped in tissue paper and a red ribbon.

A look of shock crossed his face. “What, what were doing posing for pictures like these?”

Vanessa’s smile disappeared. “I thought you would like them. I did them especially for you.”

“That’s very nice, but who took the pictures?”

“Does it matter? It was a friend.”

“Who? Was it a man?”

“I said it was a friend. I’m not going to play twenty questions.”

“Vanessa, you posed naked for these pictures. I think I have the right to know who took them.”

“First, I was not naked in any of them.” She jabbed a finger in the direction of the calendar. “Second, you don’t have the right to know who took them. It’s my body, not yours. I posed, because I wanted to have pictures of me while I’m still young enough to do it.” She stood up. “Thanks for your understanding and trust.” She ran out of the restaurant.

“Vanessa!” He called out at her departing figure.

Matthew found her curled up in a chair in the living room crying.

“Vanessa, I’m sorry you’re upset, but you do understand I was concerned about your safety.”

“Really? You sounded more concerned about who took the pictures rather than any danger I was in.”

“It was that state of undress, and you were all but naked. You could have been attacked, raped.”

“I said it was a friend and I trusted...that person.”

“You should have told me you wanted those pictures done. I would’ve been pleased to take them.”

“Since when are you into photography? You don’t have the equipment to take pictures like those.”

Matthew clinched his fists. “At least if I took them, you wouldn’t have to worry about your body being shown to the whole world.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you ever consider those photos he took can easily be scanned into the computer and be put on the Internet?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It could happen.”

“Bull shit. I trust the person who took those pictures.”

“Why won’t you at least admit it was a man who took those photos?”

“Because it’s not important who took them. I wanted those pictures taken and gave them to you as a gift. Now all I get from you is jealousy.”

“How would you like it if you found out I was sneaking around taking pictures of naked women without telling you about it?”

“I wasn’t naked for the last time.” She crossed her arms.

“Okay. How would you like it if you found out I was sneaking around taking pictures of near-naked women without telling you about it? Honestly.”

Vanessa started to open her mouth and then stopped.

“You see? Not a good feeling, is it?”

She shook her head, “It’s not the same thing. I wasn’t sneaking around. I did this without telling you only because I wanted to surprise you.”

“You sure surprised me.”

“Look, I’m sorry you didn’t like the calendar, but I’m not ashamed I had them taken and I will not apologize for having them done.”

“Well, all I can say is I hope there aren’t any more surprises waiting for me like that.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?”

“It means I’m tired and I’m going to bed.” He got up and walked out of the room.

Vanessa wiped her eyes and continued to sit in the chair.

* * * *

The bar wasn’t full yet when Vanessa and Matthew arrived, sitting down at a table without speaking much. Two weeks had passed since the anniversary dinner and

gradually they resumed a normal routine. He gave a grudging apology to her the next day and she said she forgave him but, the chill remained.

“Hello.”

They both looked up at the smiling man.

Matthew responded first. “Hello, Jimmy. Care to join us for a drink?”

Jimmy caught a frightened look from Vanessa, “No, no, thanks. Maybe later. I have to check out the pool tables.”

Matthew watched him walk away. “Nice guy. Pity about his face.”

She shrugged, “I don’t know. It gives him character.”

“Care for something to eat? I’m a bit hungry myself.”

“No, I’m good.”

Matthew ordered chicken wings and they sat quietly until they arrived. She watched him tear into the food without looking at her.

“Hey, I’m going to talk to Jimmy while you eat. He’s by himself, still waiting by the tables for someone to play with.”

He wiped his mouth with a napkin, “Sure, I’ll be here.”

She walked over to where Jimmy was sitting and sat down.

“Thanks for not sitting with us. I wanted to talk to you first and let you know what happened.”

“What did happen?”

“He blew up when he saw the calendar. Said I did a stupid thing posing for them, that it was dangerous and I could’ve been raped.”

“What? Was he serious?”

“I dunno. He said my pictures could end up on the Internet and kept repeating that I was naked, when I wasn’t.” She sighed. “I never knew he had this jealous streak before. He demanded that I tell him who the photographer was, but I refused. So don’t let on that you took the pictures or even know about them.”

“Okay, no problem.” He took a look drink from his beer mug. “How do you feel about the photos? Did I talk you into something you regret?”

“No, not at all. I’m glad I did it, his jealousy be damned.”

He grinned at her, “Good, I thought you looked great. Naturally photogenic.”

Vanessa looked down at her hands. “I think it was your magic trick with the camera and lights.”

“No, it was you. And anytime you want pictures done, even just a head shot, let me know.”

“Thanks. You still haven’t told me how much I owe you.”

“Forget it. The hassle you got for posing has made me feel guilty.”

“Okay, I better get back to Matthew. Talk to you later.”

She arrived back at the table to find Kelly and her latest boyfriend Jason sitting with Matthew. A plate of chicken bones sat to the side. Vanessa had told Kelly last week about Matthew’s demands to know the identity of the photographer and of his concerns about her safety.

Kelly looked at Vanessa and then towards Jimmy and raised an eyebrow. “So anything new with you?”

Vanessa shook her head. “Nothing you don’t already know.”

Matthew signalled for the waitress to bring another round, oblivious to the signals going between the two women.

When the drinks arrived, Matthew held up his glass. “This round is on me. I have some important news to tell.”

They all looked expectantly at him.

“I have been offered a new position with Greg and Nielson Limited in Calgary. They’re a growing company and I will be compensated at a much higher level than I am now.”

Kelly and Jason offered their congratulations but Vanessa sat with her mouth closed.

Matthew looked at her. “Isn’t that great news, dear?”

“When did you find out about this?”

“This afternoon around four it became official.”

“You tell me now? Are you going to take this job offer?”

“Well, yes, I think so. I have a few days to consider it, but I think it’s a great opportunity for us.”

“Us? For you maybe. I’d have to quit my job to move to Calgary. I think we should discuss this first.”

“Can’t you just get another job in Calgary? I mean there are lots of jobs there for your kind of work.”

“My kind of work? I worked hard to get where I am and you just want me to up and quit? I don’t think so.”

“But my increased income will more than cover any loss of income you may suffer.”

“You just don’t get it, do you? My job is just as important to me as your job is to you.”

“Vanessa, I’m sorry. Perhaps I should have talked to you about this first, but I thought you would be pleased I was offered a new job.”

“I am happy for you. But why do you assume I will just follow you to Calgary?”

“But we’re a couple. This promotion and move makes economic sense for both of us.”

“For you yes. But here is where I work. My friends live here.”

Silence descended over the table with Kelly and Jason exchanging embarrassed looks.

Vanessa stood. “I’m going home.” She walked out of the bar, ignoring Matthew calling out her name.

Vanessa walked down the street quickly, heading towards the apartment but not really wanting to go there. Her cell phone rang and she looked at the number before answering.

“Hi, Kelly.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just pissed off, that’s all.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m close to Earl’s. Think I’ll go in for a drink there and cool off.”

“I’ll join you.”

“No, don’t. You’re with Jason. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Alright, talk to you then.”

Vanessa continued to walk, thinking she could use a drink.

“Vanessa!”

She turned to the sound of the deep, familiar voice. Jimmy was jogging towards her.

“Jimmy, what are you doing here?”

“I was worried and decided to chase after you. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Thank you. I don’t mind but I’m fine.”

He looked at Earl’s Bar and Grill. “Care for a drink?”

Vanessa sat with Jimmy in Earl’s, nursing a glass of wine. She suspected Matthew wouldn’t go home until he was sure she was asleep. No doubt thinking it was best to let her cool off first. He had trouble dealing with her when she was upset, preferring to wait until the next day and then make her feel like she was acting unreasonably.

Jimmy didn’t push the conversation, simply listening as she talked.

“I just wanted to make sure you’re alright. I saw you leave the bar and you looked upset. Matthew is still there by the way.”

“Thanks. I’m alright, just pissed off at him. He got offered a new job in Calgary and just assumed I would be going with him without even discussing it with me.”

“Calgary? Are you going to go?”

“I don’t know, Jimmy. Probably. I don’t make enough to live by myself. So I’ll complain about it, but I guess I’ll have to follow him.”

“You don’t have to go if it doesn’t feel right. There are always options.”

“Not paying rent isn’t an option.”

“Look, all I’m trying to say is that if you don’t want to live in Calgary, you will find a way to stay here. You have a few friends here who will help you through the tough times.”

“Thanks Jimmy. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Okay. I just want you to know you can count on me as being one of your friends. I won’t leave you stranded. I promise.”

Vanessa nodded. There was a definite tone of Jimmy wanting to be more than just a friend. He hadn’t outright said he wanted her, but she knew he was only waiting for her to give him the signal. She took another drink of wine as she wondered what she did want to do.

“Thanks. I think I’ll head back to the apartment now.”

“Can I walk with you part of the way?”

She smiled at him. “Okay, but just a short distance.”

He talked about how when he was a kid he used to just try to hide from the world by studying books, ashamed of his face. Then when he went to collage, he found he couldn’t hide.

“I didn’t need to hide either. I met some good people who just accepted me for who I am. I’ll never win a most-handsome-man contest, but I’m not ashamed to go out in public.”

Vanessa stopped and grabbed his arm to turn him towards her. “Hey, you’re handsome enough.” She reached up and touched his scar. “You do have this bad boy look, though.” She grinned at him and then started walking again.

He caught up with her again and took her hand into his.

“Jimmy, I didn’t mean for you to get any romantic notions.” She tugged her hand free.

“Too late for that,” he grinned at her. “You have my heart already.”

She stared at him, “I didn’t want that to happen.”

He put one hand on each of her shoulders. “Are you sure?” He leaned into her, pressing his lips onto hers.

Vanessa closed her eyes as he began to lean into her, opening her mouth as his mouth touched hers. He released her after several seconds and she fell against him. “This isn’t right.”

“It can be if you let it. I want you, Vanessa. I will do whatever it takes to have you.”

“I better go.” She began to pull away and then suddenly reached up and kissed him again.

“Call me tomorrow, please.”

She nodded, “Okay.”

She was surprised Matthew was waiting for her when she returned to the apartment.

“Vanessa, I was worried about you.”

“Don’t be. I can take care of myself.”

Matthew stood by as she walked past him into the bedroom.

He followed her, “I’m sorry I didn’t discuss the new job offer with you first. I was mistaken that you would be happy about it.”

“Look, I’m tired and have a headache. Let’s talk about this another time.”

Chapter Five

"I tell you, Kelly, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"I can't believe you kissed him. You've gone wild again, girl."

"I don't feel good about it."

"Did you talk to him today?"

"Yeah, I phoned him. I said I would so I did."

"What did you talk about?"

"Small stuff. He told me he was going to wait for me, give me time to decide." She sighed. "I like him, but as a friend. When I kissed him, it was nice, but there wasn't any spark." She thought back to when Ben kissed her. Unlike him.

"What about Matthew? How's he handling your change in attitude?"

"He's confused but still acting like he's the only one who understands things. Still thinks I can just up and go to Calgary, my job is unimportant compared to his. I gotta go back to work. Talk to you later."

Vanessa returned to her work. The next day after their argument, she refused to talk to Matthew about his job offer, going for a long, solitary walk. He was definitely acting distressed and was at a loss what to do with her.

He offered to drive her to work both on Monday and again today, offers she refused.

The phone rang again, interrupting her thoughts.

"Hello, Vanessa speaking."

"Miss Perkins?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"This is Mission Hill Hospital..."

* * * *

Kelly found Vanessa sitting in a small waiting room.

"Are you okay? How's Matthew?"

"I don't know, just know it's something to do with his heart."

They sat in silence until a white-smocked doctor approached her.

"We need to talk." The dark hair woman looked at Kelly after speaking to Vanessa.

"It's alright, she can stay."

"Matthew has suffered a heart irregularity. We are going to have to do some tests, but it seems it was caused by severe stress and then triggered by cups of coffee he was having. The caffeine in the coffee started his heart to beat extremely fast and gave the same symptoms as a heart attack. He will be alright but needs to change his lifestyle." She smiled, "And no coffee."

"So I guess that's good news."

"We will know more in a few days. He's been asking for you."

"Hi, how are you feeling?"

"Better now that you're here."

She gave a thin smile. "You better start looking after yourself more."

“Yeah. Start exercising.” He reached for her hand, holding it loosely in his. “Vanessa, I’m not going to take that job in Calgary. You were right—I was deciding our future using only my needs. Can we start again?”

“Matthew, this isn’t just about the job in Calgary. Actually, I think you should take it.”

He looked puzzled.

“But I think I will stay here. I think it’s time for each of us to seek a new life. This present job of yours is too stressful for you, time for you to find something that’s not killing you.”

“But I need you, Vanessa.”

“No you don’t. You need someone who is willing to put your needs first. I’m not that woman. I still care for you, don’t get me wrong, but I need to move on.”

* * * *

Vanessa held her cell phone, staring at it before she punched in the phone number.

“Hello?” The familiar male voice answered.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Vanessa. Good to hear you. Are you coming down?”

“I’d like to. Can you still reserve a table for me?”

“No problem. I’m looking forward to seeing you.”

“Me, too. Does this make me your first band groupie?” She giggled.

Ben laughed. “No band groupie. I want to keep you for myself.”

“Really now? Are you just saying that so you get to see my calendar?”

“No, I want more than just pictures. I need you to prove to all the band members I’m not gay.”

The End