

PHILLIP THOMAS DUCK

***EXCUSE  
ME,  
MISS***

*A novella*

"Thus when we fondly flatter our desires, our  
best conceits do prove the greatest liars."

*--Michael Drayton--*

***DESIRES***

## *One*

**T**he night it all began to change for me was no different than most. I spent it in the usual fashion, seducing another woman's husband. The seduction took place at LOOK, an art gallery in Jersey City, New Jersey. Close enough to New York to carry some of the same sounds and smells, but a touch less frenetic. The art gallery immediately drew me in with brick walls painted chocolate, gypsum plaster walls painted a light cream, and a hint of cinnamon and vanilla in the air. Muted lighting, low key. I almost didn't feel the usual pangs of guilt for what I was about to do.

Almost.

I spotted Beverly Marie Kingston's husband by a painting that took up most of a cream-colored wall. Age forty-five, but he looked a decade younger, the benefits of three days each week at an LA Fitness. He was cloaked in black slacks and an attention-seeking lime green shirt. Expensive leather shoes, Piaget timepiece, a diamond-encrusted platinum bracelet on his right wrist. He sipped at a glass of ginger ale, letting his shirt sleeve snake up his arm with each sip so all of the attractive ladies in attendance could catch the shimmer of his jewelry and put two and two together: wealthy and content spending that wealth on a variety of gaudy and unnecessary items. What many women foolishly considered a good catch.

I headed his way.

When I eased into his personal space he glanced at me briefly but went back to admiring the art. There'd been a slight hitch in his gestures, though, and so I knew he was in play. I lingered there beside him, like too much perfume, before moving on. But even after I'd stepped away I wasn't completely gone from his imagination. His mind was fixated, I'm certain, on the

beautiful stranger in the form-fitting, red dress and three-inch heels. That quickly I'd become the muse in his fantasies. That quickly I had his nose wide open. I'm certain of this fact.

I found my way to an admittedly eye-catching sculpture and stopped there contemplating love at first sight. As I expected, Beverly Marie's husband sidled up next to me a moment later with his lies carefully thought out. A sip of ginger ale made his sleeve slip back once again.

I ignored him and the platinum bracelet on his wrist.

"Natalia truly outdid herself this time," he said.

I didn't respond, but lingered long enough to further infiltrate his thoughts. Then moved toward another sculpture.

"Excuse me, miss?" he called out for me in a deep baritone. A radio voice.

I kept moving, putting plenty of sway in my hips.

"Miss?" he called again.

I took that perfect moment to go ahead and turn back. Everything I did was calculated.

I eyed him, but still offered no words, just stood there smoking him over. His skin was a shade darker than nut brown. Hair cut close and absent of any visible gray; his face clean-shaven, free of razor bumps. Much taller than what I'd prepared for. About six-two. Wide-shouldered with strong hands that belonged wrapped around a woman's waist. Beverly Marie's preferably.

"I didn't mean to alarm you," he said.

"You didn't," I replied.

"But you walked off."

The first hint of his arrogance. It was beyond the realm of possibility, in his mind, for any woman to walk away once he'd spoken.

"I don't know a Natalia," I explained.

Under different circumstances I wouldn't have explained myself. I'd have walked away for the second time. But I couldn't do that with Beverly Marie Kingston's husband. That bothered me, my lack of say in the matter.

"Hovhannisyan," he said, and, no doubt noticing the frowning of my brows added, "She was born in Yerevan, the Republic of Armenia. Fascinating woman. She has some stories to tell." He smiled as if he expected me to be impressed by the people he knew and their depth.

I said, "And?"

The smile was nudged aside by a frown. "Natalia's the director of the gallery."

I simply nodded and resumed my assessment of the sculpture before me.

"Ceramic and bronze," he said, undeterred by my rudeness. "By exploring figurative and narrative subjects, the sculptor raises questions about the human condition with impacts form rather than confinement to realism. It's without question a thing of beauty. As lovely as art gets."

I wanted to concur. His analysis sounded intelligent and at least as well thought out as his lies to come. If I had a stomach for art I would've been impressed. Intelligence turned me on.

"A perfect blend of objective reality with mythology and flights of fancy," he added, to keep the conversation flowing. "Wouldn't you say?"

I started to say, "Yeah, all of that," but I heard myself reply, "Comic surrealism at its finest."

I'd done my homework.

"Yes. Exactly." He turned to me. Something as pretty as a flower bloomed in his eyes.

I prepared myself to move on.

He quickly asked, "You're here alone?"

"Sure am. And that's just how I prefer it," I said.

“That’s a troubling worldview from someone so beautiful.”

“Who said that was my entire worldview?”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“And why should I tell you?”

“I asked nicely.”

“So did Ted Bundy, I’m sure.”

“Who?”

“I have to know about more than just art,” I said. “The world is full of evil, and I have to be aware of that.”

“I’m not evil.”

“So you say.”

“I’d just like to have a name to attach to your pretty face. Pardon me.”

I had to know the correct steps for this dance. I’d pushed it as far as I could. Time to waltz some more.

“Vicki,” I said. I’d stopped giving out false names a while back because I would oftentimes forget the name I’d given. In my line of work awkward recoveries were anathema.

“Vicki,” Beverly Marie’s husband said, tasting it on his tongue. “I like that. Very sexy.”

I smirked. “Come on now. You’re definitely reaching. There’s nothing particularly sexy about my name.”

“Maybe it’s your carriage, then,” he said, smiling, his teeth straight and as near to white as teeth could be.

“My carriage?”

“Can I tell you something, Vicki?”

I tsked. “I see how this works. You don’t answer questions, you just ask them.

Controlling are we?”

“Most women appreciate a man willing to control some things,” he said, smiling with mirth.

Things came out sounding like thangs.

He was getting comfortable with me.

I aided and abetted that comfort, sexy-moaned, “Mmm. I can’t argue with you there.”

That caused him to clear his throat and swallow, hard. I did my best to keep a shadow from crossing my face.

“By the way, Vicki, my name is Benjamin Kingsto—” He actually smirked as he caught himself, and cleared his throat. “Benjamin.”

I frowned in displeasure. “Benjamin. And here I was hoping for something sexy to match your...carriage.”

His laugh was a great boom of a thing that had likely broken more than a few women’s hearts. Now that we were deeply engaged in easy conversation not-sexy-named Benjamin had morphed into a natural born lady-killer. He reached forward and took my willing hand. “I’m certain I could make Benjamin and sexy synonymous in your mind, Vicki. Believe that.”

“That an offer?” I teased. He still held my hand.

“A solid verbal commitment,” he replied.

“Speaking of commitments...” I eased my hand away, finally, and turned his left hand over. I fingered the knuckle of the naked digit on his matrimonial hand. Thought of my own naked digit and smiled.

“That’s right, baby. I’m single and free to mingle,” he said, biting his lip.



He thought my smile was for him. Good.

I continued examining his finger. No mark whatsoever on it. I'd always held some measure of respect for the men with a pale ring of skin where the wedding band should've been, or those that moved to stuff their hand in their pocket when I looked in that vicinity. He was neither. I can't deny holding that against him.

"Okay," I said. "That's good to know. I don't get involved with married men. That's a deal breaker right there." I paused and sexed up my tone. "So tell me about yourself, Benjamin."

"I'm an architect," he said. "And you?"

I couldn't help but laugh and shake my head. Brevity is the soul of wit? "Quick on the draw there, Benjamin. I'm not sure I appreciate that. I need a man with some staying power."

Everything I said had a hint of sex behind it.

"Trying to move beyond the preliminaries so we can get to the good part," Beverly Marie's husband replied. "The good part, you'll relish that, Vicki. Trust me when I tell you."

"Trust." I let the foul word dangle in the air.

"The key to all happiness in a relationship," he had the nerve to tell me.

It took the strength of the God I no longer prayed to, that and a desire to see this situation through completely, to keep me from slapping not-sexy-named Benjamin's handsome face.

"Where do you live, Benjamin?"

Pause. "All over. I travel a lot."

"What address is on your income tax return?" I prodded.

Throat clearing. "Chicago."

His lies and the ease at which he told them were more impressive than his knowledge of art.

“Chicago’s nice?”

“Beautiful city.” His gaze drifted away from me for the first time.

“I don’t understand. So how come you don’t have a better half to share that beautiful city with?”

His eyes were on me again, narrowed, looking out over a smirk of his own. “As I said, Vicki, I travel a great deal. That leaves me little time to establish relationships or work on starting a family. Unfortunately.”

That one word, unfortunately, and the disingenuousness of how Benjamin Kingston used it, would be the top soil over his grave of lies. I took then to ease into the million-dollar question.

“I guess you’ve cleared all of my hurdles, Benjamin. You don’t seem like a psycho.”

“I’m passionate but harmless, Vicki.”

“So what do you want to do tonight?” There it was.

“You mean after we leave here?” he asked without hesitation.

We.

“Yes,” I said, nodding.

I was art on the cream-colored gypsum plaster walls, that’s what not-sexy-named Benjamin’s eyes spoke to me. “You’re an out-of-towner or you live nearby here, Vicki?”

“I live close by,” I admitted.

“I won’t disrespect you by asking you to my hotel room. But maybe we could go to your place and do our thing?”

Thang.

“You think getting me is that easy?” I asked.

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