

A Thousand Masks

Excerpt – Not for Resale

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Chapter 1

The room was still but for the soft ticking of the clock. The breeze blowing through the bedroom window hinted that summer was making its way into fall. Feeling the chill, Anastasia Rose snuggled deeper into the quilt her grandmother had sewn for her. She dreamed about what the season would bring. Maple Ridge celebrated fall with bonfires and caramel apples. Family festivals played music, and crafters sold colorful mittens and hats for the upcoming winter.

Ana loved autumn for its cozy clothes, hot chocolate, and all the excuses it gave her to cuddle up close to her mom. This was the start of the holiday season when all the cousins in her family would come to town, and they'd go to the festivals, parties, and events together. Ana loved the family gatherings for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, but she most loved the time it gave her with her best friend: her grandpa. He always made her feel happy and safe, and he was the coolest grandfather in the whole world.

The familiar smell of pancakes wafted through the open bedroom door, and Ana's tummy growled. Half-awake, she jumped out of bed and raced across her room, bumping into her desk on the way out the door.

"Ouch!"

Her heavy red toolbox fell off the desk, tools scattering all around her. She winced as a long, silver wrench landed on her foot. She picked it up and looked at it. It was a gift from her grandpa. She held it for a moment, thinking of him.

"What a strange gift for a six-year-old girl," Mom had said. But Ana knew how much it meant to him. He was teaching her how to fix things, and the wrench was his way of reminding her of their time together. Ana was a girly girl, but she loved that her grandpa chose her to help tinker on his projects. She'd once been jealous of how close her older sister, Avery, was to their grandma. But now, she had grandpa's full attention.

She carefully replaced all the tools and raced down the stairs. Avery was already at the kitchen table, a perfect, round pancake on the plate in front of her.

"Good morning!" Mom said in her usual musical way. Ana sat and reached for the half-full glass of milk Mom had poured. It was family time, which meant no distractions allowed—no beeping phones, no chirps. It was just the three of them sharing their daily adventures and stories.

Ana loved these times around the table with her family. Mom was often busy with university and work. Yes, she was always home in time to make dinner, help with homework, and tuck her into bed, but Saturday morning breakfast was special family time.

“Mom, what was it like when you were a girl? Did Grandma make you pancakes too?” Ana asked. Sophia frowned slightly and didn’t answer. Ana noticed so she shifted her eyes away, sorry she’d asked. Her mom never spoke of her time when she was young. *Maybe she had a secret*, Ana thought, hoping that one day, when she was old enough, Mom would share.

Ana scarfed down her breakfast and rushed out, bursting through the front door, ready to start her day’s adventures. But Avery didn’t follow. Ana looked back to see she was still at the open door with her usual worried look.

Sophia came up behind Avery and whispered something Ana couldn’t hear. Finally, Avery smiled and stepped outside.

“Come on! What’s taking you so long?” Ana said, dashing down the driveway.

“Don’t go walking around the block! Stay where I can see you,” Sophia shouted.

The sun was high in the British Columbia sky, gleaming glorious rays of warmth on Ana’s skin. The air was filled with laughter from the neighborhood kids who were already out playing, shouting, and having fun. Within minutes, she was four feet up in the tall oak by their kitchen window, looking down at her sister.

“Be careful, Ana! You’re going to fall!” Avery said. Ana just laughed and climbed even higher, not worrying about falling or her sister’s nervous voice. Ana knew Avery preferred it when they just laid on the grass with their heads touching, watching the clouds go by.

“Look, Avery! That one’s a daddy chicken going home to his family!”

“Yes, he’s even got a briefcase!” Avery said. “We should go back inside and start getting ready. Mom said grandma and grandpa are coming today.”

“Oh yes! I can’t wait!” Ana replied. “I want to show grandpa how well I looked after my toolbox!”

Ana saw Avery roll her eyes, but she didn’t care. She and Grandpa would work in the garage together, and he would show her his next big project.

“Anything can be fixed,” he would say as they got to work. He always promised that he would one day let her help fix up the old car in their garage. She had been doing her stretches so she could grow tall enough to reach inside without a stool. Maybe today was the day!

When they got inside, they found Mom baking brownies for their grandparent's visit. Ana tried to sneak a piece from the stack cooling on the counter.

"I knew the smell would bring you home," Mom said, shooing her away. "It's like a silent alarm for you and your sister!"

"No, Mom. I came to see you because I love you so much. You're the best mommy ever!" Ana's emerald green eyes gleamed as she teased. Mom knew the real reason she was acting so nice. She was surprised when Mom knelt and put her hands on Ana's cheeks.

"Ana, you and your sister are my most precious gifts." She pinched Ana's nose. "Even though I know you are just saying that for a brownie!" She handed Ana a brownie, and as she took it, she thought she saw a little tear glittering in her mother's eye. Then Ana heard the low rumble of a car in the driveway.

"They're here!" she squealed with excitement, but Avery let out a deep breath as if she'd been holding it in.

After welcoming hugs and kisses, Ana and Avery opened the presents their grandparents had brought. Sophia went to make dinner and Grandma followed behind. Avery went along to have "big girl" conversations that poor little Ana wouldn't understand. She didn't mind because that meant she could have grandpa all to herself.

"You know that old car in your Mama's garage?" he asked. He'd leaned down close to her face. She thought his breath smelled a little funny, but she'd decided it was just "grandpa smell."

Ana nodded.

"How about you help me get started on it, Ana-Cakes?" he said.

Ana didn't say a word as she ran to the garage door, proud that she was grown-up enough to be grandpa's assistant. As they worked, Grandpa told her stories about what life was like when he was a six-year-old. She loved how he trusted her enough to share his secrets.

"Ana, hand me that wrench there," he said, and she was happy to oblige. When Sophia called them for dinner, Ana watched grandpa roll out from under the car on his funny mechanic's board contraption. She put out her hand to help him up. His greasy fingers intertwined with hers, and they held hands all the way to the kitchen. Ana didn't even mind how long it took to wash the grease off.

* * *

“My favorite fish fry, Sophia! Thank you!” Grandpa said, pushing back from the table.

Ana was sleepy from lunch but also from Avery sharing all the little details about her play at school. When Grandpa put out his hand, Ana didn’t waste a minute taking it and following him toward the garage. She looked back at the ladies at the table. She’d rather hang out with grandpa and tinker than listen to another Avery story for the millionth time.

Time flew by. Before they knew it, it was time for Ana and Avery to go to bed. Whenever their grandparents came to visit, the girls slept together in Ana’s room. Usually, it would feel like a huge deal to have to give up part of her bed for her sister, but tonight Ana felt like a little company wouldn’t be such a bad thing. The day had been warm and bright, but the windows had been closed and the room felt eerily cold. But more than that, something felt out of place.

“It feels funny in here,” she said to Avery, who didn’t reply.

One thing was for sure: Avery was acting very strange, and Ana couldn’t understand why. Normally, Avery’s constant babble and chatter filled the room, but not tonight. Ana wanted to say something but felt afraid to—as if something bad would happen if she said a single word.

Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore. “What’s wrong?” she asked, taking a big gulp of air.

“Oh . . .” Avery said. “It’s probably nothing.”

“Come on then! Spit it out! Tell me!” Ana felt a shiver that wasn’t from the cold.

“Ana, you can’t tell anyone I said this . . .” Avery said.

Ana waited while Avery stammered and paused.

“Well, I . . . sometimes, I feel a little bit uncomfortable around Grandpa.”

Ana stared at her sister. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Avery said. “It’s confusing.”

Ana wanted to push her for more, but Avery clamped her mouth shut, got into bed, and closed her eyes. When she peeked and saw Ana was still staring, she turned her back. It was clear to Ana that the conversation was over for Avery.

“What do you mean?” Ana asked her sister one last time, but Avery ignored her. She felt a strange knot in her stomach, and worry made it hard to fall asleep. She didn’t have her usual good dreams that night. Ana was normally a very happy morning person but not this time. Today she woke up groggy and in a terrible mood; scared and confused. Something was wrong.

Everything about the morning looked the same as yesterday. It was bright and sunny and children played outside. But to Ana, everything felt different. Breakfast seemed to take longer than usual, and neither Avery nor Ana chattered away like they normally would. Ana squirmed in her seat.

“Didn’t you girls sleep well?” grandma asked, her voice full of concern. Both nodded, but they didn’t look up from their plates.

“Girls, manners,” Mom said.

“Bad dream . . .” Avery said.

“Me too,” Ana said.

“Oh, my babies!” Sophia said. Sitting between them so she could hug them both, she reassured them, “It was just a dream; it’s all over now. You don’t have to be scared!” and then she kissed both her girls on their noses.

“Ana, why don’t you help grandpa with the car again today? You love that, don’t you?” Grandma said. But this time, Ana wished she could stay at the table and listen to the ladies’ gossip.

When he stood up and held out his hand, Ana followed her grandfather to the garage. She sat on a tire and watched as he inspected under the hood of the car.

“Now, Ana-Cakes,” he said. “What does a carburetor do?”

The nickname she loved yesterday didn’t feel so good today.

“Of course, why would you know?” he said when she didn’t answer. He let out a long and loud laugh. He sat on the edge of the car and lifted Ana onto his lap, gripping her by the middle.

“Okay, Miss Sensitive! Forget the carburetor! What does a wrench do? I told you this one, remember?” he asked, giving her a tiny shake. His voice was firm and a little scary.

Ana looked at him. “It fixes things,” she said almost in a whisper.

Grandpa smirked, clutching her tiny waist even tighter. When she let out the faintest whimper, it was smothered right away.

And then there was silence.

Chapter 6

Ten years later

“Happy ten-year anniversary!” Haven looking ravishing tonight with her six-inch black stilettos and ran to hug Ana Laughing, they both sat down at their table. Haven was the last one to arrive to their joint celebration. Their friends were already seated, sipping on their cocktails.

“Happy Anniversary to you too!” Ana said. Haven giggled, brushing her glowing blonde hair behind her ears to reveal her equally shining diamond earrings.

“Ohhh! Are they new?” Haven leaned across their friend Anthony and took his drink.

Ana twirled her hair around her finger and nodded. “A gift from my boss for our special day.” Ana winked. Haven nodded, knowing exactly what that meant. Anthony stood up, ready to make a toast.

“It’s been ten years since Seattle was hit by a big hurricane.” The table went silent. They were a little confused but continued to listen to his loud but gentle voice. Anthony was handsome in his tailored navy suit. If his voice hadn’t commanded everyone’s attention, his physique would have. “It’s been ten years since two young, wild women came to conquer our beautiful city.” The table burst into laughter. “Ten years since two small-town girls made this city their home. I know I’m not the only one who is happy about that! Ana and Haven, we’re all so glad you came into our lives and brought so much fun chaos with you!”

Everyone at the table raised their glasses and cheered as Haven downed her drink and Ana sipped, smiling into her glass. She didn’t know how Haven was feeling. But she knew her friend well, and the fact that she was already tipsy meant she had felt nervous about the memories of leaving Maple Ridge flooding back. Ana had been far too busy with work to think about how different life had been ten years ago.

Back then, they were two lost teenagers who had no real clue what they were looking for, let alone what they were doing. Ana had no real path; all she knew was she wanted to see the lights and buildings that her good friend Grace had told her about. She wanted to make a life that was her own. Grace had not oversold either. To Ana, Seattle is where she belonged. This is where she’d first found herself—away from her past.

At first, she and Haven had truly struggled, both of them working two to three jobs to afford rent. Before long, they were spending way more money on their lifestyle than their accommodation. A series of mistakes led them to consider moving back to Vancouver. Then, they met Anthony. Anthony was four years older, a semi-struggling artist from a wealthy family who had also run away to Seattle to make something of himself. He had been cut off from his family, having recently announced that he was gay, and went searching for acceptance. He had found it in the girls. He became best friends with Ana and Haven and enjoyed being able to share anything to them without fear of judgement. The three of them had a lot of fun together in the early days following their arrival to Seattle. There had been chaos, but they had also learned a lot about themselves and each other.

Their friends, who all sat around the table, had been picked up along the way, all of them looking for somewhere to belong. Ana looked around at them—they were a group of misfits who somehow managed to pull their life together to become the successes they were. Haven had found her calling in marketing. She'd started off as an assistant to a banking firm where she worked her way up, tirelessly juggling multiple projects until she got to where she was now: head of marketing for that same company who had taken her in as a sixteen-year-old glorified coffee maker.

Anthony had used his power of networking to get into the underground art scene, rubbing shoulders with other rich kids who had also been trying to make it as starving artists. They eventually introduced him to the right people. His art gallery had become extremely popular and was often where Ana and Haven started on their Friday nights out, drinking at the bar with the big man himself as he updated them on his most recent show.

Then there was Anastasia Rose, the girl who thought she would not get far in life because many of the ones that loved her hurt her in ways that would never heal. The world had let her down, and the actions of betrayal she had endured made her feel unworthy. But Ana was a survivor. Little by little, she had been taking the steps that would one day lead her to deciding that she was going to make something of herself, that she would prove to the world—and more importantly to herself—she *was* worthy of an amazing life no matter what had happened in her past. She no longer blamed herself for her grandfather's betrayal. Moving on from that shitty thing that happened to her as a young girl is what saved her and made her feel worthy again.

The stars had started to align in Ana's world to guide her to a new path, and while she hadn't known what she wanted to be, she did know she dreamed of being worlds away from who

she had been. Once Anastasia learned how to become tough and confident, a company took notice of her. The world opened opportunities for her to go from a small-town Canadian girl into a fierce secret weapon in Corporate America. She was a true force to be reckoned with. She had bussed tables by day and schmoozed with the business elites by night, eventually landing a job in sales. Ana was guided by older friends who saw her determination and pushed her to make a name for herself. At twenty-six years old, she was making big money in the heart of Seattle and showed no signs of slowing down.

Ana was head of sales and had gotten close to the CEO of Global Communications Corporation, one of the biggest tech companies in Seattle. Life was good, and it only kept getting better. She was a world away from small-town Ana who had grown to become afraid of her own shadow. Now, Anastasia Rose rubbed shoulders with important people in business and had become their equal. People never questioned her right to sit at the VIP table, but sometimes Ana questioned whether anyone saw her insecurities. On those occasions, Haven would remind her of why they'd come to the city in the first place: "We can be anyone we want to be. Don't forget that you've earned your right to be anywhere you want and exactly where you are."

Of all the changes her life had gone through, Ana's relationship with her mother was one of the parts that never changed. No matter what she was going through or where she was, the one constant she had was her mom, who she often referred to as her "soulmate." They spoke several times a week. Nothing happened in Ana's life that her mother didn't know about. Then there was Haven. Together they had battled through traumas they'd only seen in movies. Yet here they were, seated around a table full of people who truly loved them and had been witness to their rise to success.

"Hey, don't tell me you're slowing down already!" Hilary, Ana's redheaded, loud-mouthed friend, laughed. She played the role of the hopeless romantic in their group. Hilary was coming out of her tenth relationship this year, and it was only April. Ana smiled and took her strawberry daiquiri from the table and chugged it. Tonight was a celebration, and she was going to enjoy every minute of it. Anthony ordered four bottles of champagne and Ana raised her eyebrow at him.

"What? We're celebrating!" He smiled, nudging Ana and once again raising his glass at her.

The group was in full party mode and was the loudest table in the restaurant. Ana excused herself to go to the bathroom. Her long black dress clung to her toned body as she made her way

across the floor. She twirled her hair around her finger again, already feeling the buzz from the drinks. She thought about the business meeting she'd had this afternoon. She'd managed to secure a big client and her boss had praised her. The thought of having done a good job brought a smile to her face, and she wasn't paying as much attention as she should have been and bumped into somebody.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" Ana said, leaning over to the man to help steady him.

"Hey! Watch where you're—" the man replied before looking at Ana and stopping mid-sentence. "Oh . . . I'm sorry. I didn't hurt you, did I?" His voice changed its tone and softened into concern. The way his brown eyes looked into Ana's made her blush, and she was thankful that the lights were dimmed so he wouldn't notice.

Handsome. Head to toe gorgeous. He was dressed in a tailored suit, smelled expensive, and had a soft, but gruff, voice. Ana felt herself weaken as he flashed her a smile.

"No . . . I . . . I didn't see you," she stammered, feeling herself blush more at the sudden onset of butterflies in her stomach. He let out a low seductive laugh as he realized she was still holding on to his elbow. Ana followed his eyes to where her hands were and let go quickly. Her blush deepened.

"It's not a problem. It's crowded in here." He kindly gave her an excuse.

Ana nodded. "Anyway, sorry again. I better, uh . . ." Ana apologized and gestured to the restroom, making her way around the gorgeous man who exuded sex and looked like he commanded any room he walked into just for being him. He straightened up and touched her shoulder gently. Her body shivered with excitement. *Get a grip on yourself, Ana*, she thought to herself.

"So soon?" he asked, his smile bringing tingles down Ana's spine. "Well . . . I hope I bump into you again." With that, he turned on his heel and walked back to his table. Ana watched as all eyes were on him. *He certainly commands a room* she thought to herself.

As Ana made her way out of the bathroom, she took a casual and quick glance in the direction of the handsome stranger's table, but it was now empty. She felt a pang of disappointment; she could have had a lot of fun with him. She adjusted her dress, carefully positioning the slit that accentuated her toned legs. She felt good and looked even better.

Making her way back to the table, she noticed that her group had grown in size. There were several people she didn't recognize sitting with her friends. Ana took her place in between Haven

and Anthony. Anthony passed her a glass of champagne, his voice loud, showing just how drunk he had gotten since she'd been gone.

“And here is our other celebrant, Miss Anastasia Rose!” Ana smiled and looked around the table, a few new men and women smiled back at her, all strangers but one. Further down the table sat a newly familiar face that grinned back at her. Ana swallowed her excitement as she stared at the handsome stranger she'd just encountered.

Haven got up and hugged her friend, whispering in her ear, “Ana, Hilary pulled some hotties to our table. Which one's yours?” Ana giggled and pushed her friend away playfully, Ana rolled her eyes pretending to not want any part of the manhunt, deep down already knowing who she wanted. Hilary draped her arms around the handsome stranger, whispering something in his ear. Not once did he take his gaze away from Ana. She pretended not to notice as she got talking to the man opposite her. His name was Darren; he was a tall, dark, and handsome, and a rich banker. She could tell from the Rolex that proudly sat on his muscular wrist. Sure, he was charming. He seemed like a nice guy, but Ana twirled her hair around her finger and cut her eyes to the end of the table to see if the stranger was playing up to Hilary's attention. Hilary was still in his ear, and he seemed to be engrossed in their conversation. Ana felt a pang of jealousy. She knew that if Hilary wanted something, she got it. So Ana pushed herself to refocus on the conversation with Darren.

Her friends mingled. Anthony had found himself some eye candy. They had tucked themselves at the corner of the table, stealing kisses as if they were two teenagers. *Good for him*, Ana thought to herself. A little further down, Haven had moved to sit on a guy's lap and was in a full-blown make out session as if no one else was around. Her other friends were talking, laughing, and drinking with other people. Darren had started to bore her with bad finance jokes. Ana was not someone who was overly picky when it came to hook ups, but tonight she wanted more intelligent conversation. She had a whole bottle of champagne to herself and used it to divert herself while Darren talked about his career and his love for horses. Ana couldn't relate and introduced him to her friend, Sienna, who had been caught in a debate with a few other people. Sienna looked at her, thankful that she had been pulled out of the conversation. They seemed to hit it off right away. Ana smiled as she felt she had managed to dodge the most boring bullet in town.

Getting up, Ana made her way to the bar. If she was going to get through the orgy that her friends had started forming, she needed to get drunk. As she waited to be served, a hand suddenly resting at the small of her back. She felt a familiar tingle on her exposed skin as she looked beside her to find the handsome stranger.

“What’s your poison?” he asked, totally oblivious to what his touch had done to her.

“Actually, I think I’m ready for shots.” She smiled.

“That bad, huh?” He laughed, flashing his beautiful, perfect teeth at her. Ana felt her knees give a little as she looked away. Why did he have that effect on her?

“I’m Ana by the way,” she said, putting her hand out to him.

“Hunter,” he replied, taking her delicate hands into his and kissing it gently. She was not expecting it and couldn’t help but think about how soft his lips were against her hand. Her body stiffened. He was not going to be good for her, she knew it, but at that moment, she couldn’t think of anything other than feeling his body on hers.

They took a few shots together and then joined their friends who had migrated to the dance floor. Was it just Ana’s imagination, or did the music get louder? The bar got hotter as she danced with her friends. Hunter was never too far away. Hilary had found herself back at his side, dancing seductively. This time, Ana was jealous. Guilt followed soon after as the one thing she never wanted was the drama of fighting over a guy with one of her friends. Haven and Anthony were whispering between themselves, and Ana looked at them both wanting to be part of their conversation.

“We were just saying how embarrassing Hilary is being,” Haven said a little too loudly as her drunk voice took over her ability to whisper. Anthony nodded, sipping his martini and dancing to the music. Ana rolled her eyes again. She was above gossiping, and yet she couldn’t help but feel some kind of triumph. As Hilary grinded against Hunter, he looked up and locked eyes with Ana. He rolled his eyes, which made Ana giggle quietly to herself.

Haven tugged at Ana as Anthony used Haven to balance himself. “He’s into you, you know?” Haven raised an eyebrow at Ana. How was it that even in her state of mind Haven could still read a room perfectly?

Anthony nodded. “Go get what’s yours!” he said as his unexpected companion grabbed him from behind and the two of them excused themselves off the dance floor. Haven winked at

Ana, pushing her a little closer to Hunter and then went off to find her new friend. Hunter watched as Ana made her way toward him while Hilary still danced, performing for Hunter.

“Hey, Hil. I saw the guy from the other day at the bar,” Ana said, knowing it would lead her friend to go and hunt down the guy who had escaped her clutches. Hilary stopped dancing, her face looking serious as she made a beeline toward the bar. Hunter pretended to sigh with relief and pulled Ana immediately toward him, holding her ever so lightly by the small of her back. *My god, he smelled good*, Ana thought to herself.

“I never thought she’d leave, so thank you,” he whispered into her ear, his lips touching her the skin softly. Ana moaned internally.

“Tell me. What was it about Hilary that enticed you?” Ana asked cheekily, wanting to play a little with Hunter, knowing it may be a dangerous thing to do. Her body knew what it wanted.

Hunter looked at her, surprised by her question. “What makes you think I was interested *in her?*” Ana knew immediately from the way he said the words and pressed into her body that he wanted her just as much as she wanted him. With Hillary out of the way, she could take her turn to dance with him, and wow, could he move.

Within moments, it felt like they were the only ones there, and the music took over. The heat radiated between them. Sweat glided down their skin, making them hotter than they should be, but their bodies moved in sync together. The short, ragged breaths indicated the lust between them was palpable.

The scent of his aftershave mixed with their sweat made her want him even more. Hunter grabbed Ana’s face with both hands and drove his tongue deep into her mouth. She had wanted to taste him and was pleased that he seemed to feel the same. Unable to help herself, she grabbed his hair and pulled him closer to her, eager to taste more of him. In her mind, she knew something about Hunter was dangerous, but none of that mattered at that moment. She wanted him, and he definitely wanted her. The aching tension between them built up to a point where neither could stand it anymore.

Still fully in control, Hunter whispered everything their bodies were saying. “I want you now.” Hunter’s words breached her defences. With those four words, they were gone.

* * *

Ana got ready for work Monday morning and couldn’t help thinking about her night with Hunter. What she liked the most was that she found someone on her level when it came to

intelligence and wit. Hunter was her kind of man: confident, a gentleman in public, and a completely different story behind closed doors. If truth be told, Ana knew nothing about him. She did Google him the next day, finding him in plenty of photos with gorgeous women. One article even referred to him as the “Sexiest Bachelor in Seattle.” When she saw that, Ana felt she shouldn’t hold out hope. But the way he hungrily took her body in, kissing every part of her skin, made her feel like she had never felt before. She could still smell his aftershave on her body.

Ana shivered as she remembered how he had undressed her. He was gentle at first, taking in every moment as she’d held her breath, letting him explore her. Her impatient hands had tugged at his shirt, untying each button in eagerness to see more of his chiselled body. Every undone button caused her body to ache even more. She pulled him closer to her until they were skin to skin. As they kissed, she found herself carried away by a fantasy she didn’t even want to acknowledge to herself, but she pretended anyway. After all, this was a game Anastasia was good at. She imagined Hunter thinking about how she was a stunningly beautiful woman, perfect in every way: her body, her mind, her skin. She imagined him thinking they were a match for each other in every sense. She imagined him wanting her more than he’s ever wanted anybody else. Ana caught herself thinking this again and internally chastised herself. *Men who felt like that didn’t exist*, she thought. Secretly, it’s why she never exchanged phone numbers, so that they couldn’t break the fantasy she’d created. and this way, she couldn’t be betrayed by anyone *again*.

She was still flushed from her memories when she walked into the boardroom.

“So, Ana, what magic did you use to win the Harvey account?” teased her colleague, Piper, from across the room. Ana helped herself to coffee before taking her seat at the table.

“No magic. Just charm.” Ana winked, causing Piper to giggle. Ana loved Monday mornings. She and Piper were always first to the board meeting, which meant they could gossip about what happened over the weekend and have all the womanly chats they couldn’t have in front of their team which was mostly men. Piper shared her ups and downs of being married to her childhood sweetheart. Ana loved to hear her stories because they often restored her faith in men, leading her to believe there were some men that truly loved without betrayal. Piper often told Ana that love was a decision to be committed to one another faithfully, especially through the hard times. She remembered one particular time when Piper had said, “Loving someone during the fun times is easy but it’s the willingness to support and love each other through life’s hardest hurdles, that is what truly makes or breaks a marriage.” Ana could tell how much Piper loved her husband.

Ana secretly hoped she could one day find this type of love too. But she often asked herself and her therapist if she was worthy of that kind of love. After years of therapy, Ana was aware that this kind of thinking was toxic, but she saved all those thoughts for her journals where she let all her true feelings out, the ones that haunted her deep inside her soul. She often thought of it as the other Ana, the person no one knew—the Ana that hid behind a mask. Ana had spent countless hours trying to reconcile her feelings in her journals. The thoughts would circle in her head until she felt she had some clarity, but they'd often come back after conversations with Piper.

Ana filled Piper in on her night with Hunter and how they had spent their Saturday barely seeing the sunlight.

“So when will you see him again?” Piper asked, completely engrossed in Ana’s story. She lived her “single life” vicariously through Ana and loved the dirty updates her colleague had for her.

“Never!” Ana shook her head “We didn’t even exchange numbers. It was just a hookup.” Ana laughed, secretly feeling a pang of disappointment in her stomach. She was used to one-night stands, but that didn’t stop her from sometimes wishing someone would stay and want more.

“Seems like he put out good at least.” Piper laughed, shuffling her papers. Ana stirred herself into business mode as their colleagues filed into the boardroom.

Their meeting went as any Monday did. There were the typical boys’ club jokes that went over Ana and Piper’s heads. They sat pretty, which was what they were hired for, but Ana knew she was capable of more than just being eye candy for the sex-starved older men in her office. That’s what made her a secret weapon. For years, Ana had used her looks to convince powerful men into letting her into their meetings. She listened and then took the knowledge she gained to teach herself how to be just as powerful, cleverer, and hungrier than any of the men that had years and experience above her.

Mr. Jacobson, the CEO, favored Ana. Everyone in the boardroom knew that. He thought the world of her because of how hard she worked. Her hard work showed in the kinds of clients she was pulling in. Everyone in the office fought for Mr. Jacobson’s approval, but jealousy often focused on Ana. At first, this intimidated her. She’d have to constantly remind herself that she belonged there and worked hard to have a seat at the executive table. She worked harder than anyone else because she was an ambitious woman with many dreams to fulfil. She knew that meant she had to work harder than anyone in the room.

Mr. Jacobson had built his company from humble beginnings. He appreciated hard work much more than brownnosing, which is what drew him to Ana. In his old age, he took much more of a backseat than he had wanted to, but even he could admit it was of some relief to him. But still, no matter what, he always made it to the Monday meetings to make sure he was still involved in everything. If he had complete control, he would put Ana in a much higher position than she was now. He once told her that he would have loved to be able to train her to take over someday, but The Old Boys Club that filled his office would never allow it. Instead, he did what he could to equip Ana with every opportunity to feed her hunger to learn more.

As the meeting—a meeting that could have been an email—ended, and before his team could get up from their chairs, he cleared his throat.

“I’d like to say well done to Anastasia.” He stood and gestured to her, making the table look at Ana who was midway through drinking her coffee. Ana smiled awkwardly at Mr. Jacobson.

“Through sheer hard work and determination, Anastasia managed to finally convince Harvey Estates to sign a contract with us,” he announced, beaming at his young protégé. Her colleagues congratulated Ana and celebrated her achievement with handshakes and pats on the back. Ana knew a lot of it was for show, and though she deserved to be celebrated, she would surely be on the back end of quite a few jealous comments and jokes later on from her colleagues who had spent years trying to secure the same client with no success.

Ana got up to leave the boardroom when Mr. Jacobson called her back in.

“Anastasia, you know Mrs. Jacobson and I don’t enjoy nights out much anymore. We were invited to a party, and I thought perhaps you could have our tickets. Maybe you and a couple of friends could go? I’m sure you’d have much more fun than we would.” He didn’t wait for Ana to respond before handing her three tickets.

“Thank you, sir.” He walked away, leaving Ana staring at the invitations, unsure what to do with them. By the way they glittered and their sheer weight, Ana knew this was an exclusive party. She got back to her office and immediately texted Anthony and Haven and told them about the party. In typical Haven fashion, the response came quickly. Anthony’s response followed shortly after. Both were in. All that was left was for them to find outfits for their first masquerade ball.

* * *

Stepping out of the black car, Anthony straightened his suit and put his mask on, turning to help the ladies out of the car. Haven stepped out first, adjusting the straps on her emerald gown. She carefully placed her mask on her face. Anthony escorted Ana out of the car. All eyes instantly found her. She was radiant in a beautiful, silver ball gown that grazed the floor and was accessorized with the most stunning diamonds. The back of her dress dipped so low you could see the small of the back and her soft, smooth skin. Her dress made her feel like a princess as it billowed out around her. Her long hair framed her petite body with the slightest of curls. A stunning mask glittered as it covered the top half of her face, adorned with an intricate design that matched her gown. She made sure she felt just as beautiful on the inside as she did on the outside. Anthony proudly escorted both his friends, one on each arm. Cameras were flashing constantly as they exited the car.

Ana could feel the wealth and luxury oozing from every corner of the room. A big band played on a beautiful stage. Gloved waiters stood against the walls while others passed trays of food that Ana doubted she could pronounce. Chandeliers glittered like the diamonds and gems on the wrists and necks of the women around her. She could easily picture herself in a life where this was the norm.

The grand entrance glowed with golden lights as if the gates into heaven just opened with gold chandeliers that spiraled down the walls, illuminating the glimmering golden walls; the floor was polished so brightly that it looked like an iced-over lake. It was not just the ballroom that was spectacular; it was also the women. They sparkled like a box of diamonds in shades of ruby, emerald, and amethysts, all swirling before them. Low murmurs of their chatter accompanied a room filled with large blooms of oriental lilies and roses, covering the space with their beautiful color and smell. The room was nothing short of breathtaking.

The whole event screamed opulence. “We’re not in Kansas anymore . . .” marveled Haven, causing her two friends to laugh quietly to themselves. Champagne was being poured by the most elegant servers Ana had ever seen. *So this is how the other half lived*, she thought to herself. Guests dressed head to toe in designer dress wear; the price tags would cause even the biggest shopaholic to shed a tear. Ana felt slight discomfort. Moments like these, surrounded by Seattle’s elite—the wealthy world of old money, powerful CEOs, and billion-dollar bank accounts—normally would have reminded her of where she had come from. But tonight, Anastasia stole the show in every way. From the moment she walked in, all eyes were on her, and she reveled in the attention,

knowing full well she worked hard to get there. And she did belong. Ana was damn good at what she did, and she always did it with integrity and honesty. There would be no negative talk tonight.

“How do you guys like it?” Ana asked, trying to mask her nerves. Anthony stood speechless as he tried to take in the view. Grand would not even come close to how everything looked. From top to bottom, the ballroom screamed decadence.

The friends were escorted to their table to set their things down. They were seated with friends of Mr. and Mrs. Jacobson, who welcomingly introduced themselves. The table got to know each other, exchanging information about themselves. “Anastasia, Duncan always talks very fondly of you. He says you are fantastic at your work!” A lady, who had introduced herself as the wife of Mr. Jacobson’s best friend, exclaimed. She looked radiant in her ruby-studded dress and with her long flowing red hair.

“Thank you, Mrs. Reese,” Ana replied politely. “Mr. Jacobson is a great mentor and boss. He’s great inspiration to work hard.”

A few glasses of champagne later, the entertainment had begun. There was so much going on that the three decided to circle the ballroom to get a view of everything.

People had already gotten up and started dancing. Some men had excused themselves to the smoking room to smoke cigars. Anthony was already drawn to a few men who had caught his eye, mainly one who had made his way to the smoking room.

“Can we head to the smoking room? I spy someone intriguing.” Anthony was already plotting.

“Sure.” Ana shrugged and agreed but was interrupted by Haven.

“Guys! We can’t yet. This is the perfect opportunity for me to finally land a rich husband. I need you as my wing people.” Despite this being an ongoing joke, Haven meant exactly what she said.

This was part of the fun at being able to attend parties like these. They had the opportunity to meet the elites they never got the chance to meet. On a few occasions, Ana found herself introducing herself to strangers who would make a point of telling her how beautiful she looked. She kept reminding herself that she was here under the invitation of Mr. Jacobson and therefore was to be on her best behavior. Anthony and Haven had already forgotten where they were and were lapping up the champagne that flowed so freely.

Haven was involved with a man dressed in a black silk tuxedo, who in her words “smelled rich,” so Ana and Anthony excused themselves to make their way to the dance floor.

“Since when did everyone become professional ballroom dancers?” Ana asked. Anthony marveled at the skills of those around them.

Anthony laughed. “Us old money folks, we’re taught how to dance in a way that will make everyone else feel poor.” He laughed. Ana adjusted her mask and watched in awe of everyone who seemed to dance so elegantly and with ease.

Anthony, knowing Ana the way he did, took her hand and said, “I got you, baby girl.” He smiled reassuringly at his best friend as he guided her through the dance, gliding together along the floor. Ana felt light and delicate in his arms. Feeling more comfortable with herself, Ana allowed herself to enjoy the moment under the sparkling chandelier to the beautiful tune of the piano and string orchestra. It felt like she was in a movie. “If only my mom could see me right now!” she said to Anthony as she giggled.

Anthony did a great job at making Ana look like a professional dancer too. She felt less out of place and more like she belonged there. Haven waved from the side of the dance floor, beckoning them over to her. They rolled their eyes but gracefully made their way over to her through the dancers.

“Cameron is going to the smoking room as he wants to talk to someone about business,” she whispered to her friends. Ana laughed. This meant she wanted her wing friends to come with her.

Ana had expected the room to be as it was back when she was an underage teen. She waited to start choking from the smoke as they went through the doors, but instead, she was met with what could only be described as the most elegant library she had ever seen. The dark panelled walls and expensive furnishings is what she imagined an old gentleman’s quarters must have looked like. Rightfully so, as most of the guests there were old men in expensive suits holding cigars. Anthony was offered his own cigar upon entry, which he gladly took, and Ana reached her hand out to take one too. Haven made her way to her new companion Cameron, quickly forgetting her nerves. Anthony spotted the guy he had seen earlier, and he and Ana made their way over to him.

Ana and Anthony introduced themselves. Anthony’s eye candy introduced himself as Ian Winthrop Jr. His parents were the hosts of the masquerade ball and, from the sounds of it, were

very important people. A few others introduced themselves, but it was clear to Ana that Anthony and Ian had eyes only for each other. Exchanging coy smiles while talking about how fabulous the party was, Ana watched as her friend showed unusual signs of being shy. Being a welcoming host, Ian ensured everyone felt comfortable, all the while getting closer to Anthony. Ian made every excuse to speak to him directly and brush his arm against Anthony's. Ana watched like it was her favorite TV show, rooting for Anthony to have the romance he dreamed of. A new group of guests came into the room. Ian spotted a friend of his and beckoned him over. Ana's body stiffened as she smelled the delicious familiar scent of aftershave. Pretending not to have noticed, she waited to be introduced.

"Hunter, these are my new friends, Anthony and Ana." Hunter's gaze fell on Ana instantly. His mouth dropped slightly before he quickly composed himself.

"Pleased to meet you both," he said, his bright blue eyes shining through his silk black mask, eyes that would forever be etched into her brain. She knew it was him, and he clearly knew it was her. Ana blushed; the room immediately started to feel hotter. The spark between them couldn't be ignored, but they were at a ball. *Maybe this was the opportunity to actually get to know a little about this mysterious man,* thought Ana.

Conversation flowed as they spoke about work. Hunter admitted hearing Ana's name pop up in conversation within the business world.

"You've made some very powerful fans, Ana," Hunter said in an approving tone.

"Oh, so it's Ana that you've been looking for all night, H?" Ian asked, causing Hunter to smile smugly.

"Well, I didn't know it was this Ana," he replied, nodding to the confused Ana.

"You were looking for me?" she asked, looking from Ian to Hunter as she waited for an explanation.

"Hunter's boss asked him to meet the wildfire, Ana, they'd been hearing so much about," Ian explained.

"He wanted me to find out what it would take for you to join us in our firm," Hunter continued. Surprise didn't describe the gravity of how Ana felt in that moment. She knew she was good at her job, but to be headhunted at such an extravagant party seemed too good to be true.

"You're kidding, right?" Ana blurted, unable to contain her disbelief. Anthony laughed and nudged Ana.

“People are finally talking about your amazing skills, Ana,” he said encouragingly.

“I don’t understand . . .” Ana began, stopping mid-sentence to absorb what Hunter was offering her.

“Perhaps you’d allow me a few minutes of your time to explain? Maybe somewhere a little more private?” Hunter put his arm out for Ana to take. Ian looked at Anthony longingly and, without hesitating, insisted Hunter and Ana leave to have their conversation. Ana kissed Anthony on the cheek and thanked Ian for his hospitality before following Hunter. Hunter led Ana through the dance floor. People parted to make way for him. Before she could think about why that may be, someone bumped into Ana, knocking her over. Hunter’s strong arms immediately grabbed her whole body before she fell in embarrassment to the floor. Ana looked up as Hunter held her in his arms. They were so close they could kiss. Ana looked at Hunter, shocked and slightly embarrassed. But the look on Hunter’s face was a heated one. He quickly swooped her up and offered his arm, continuing to casually walk through the rest of the dance floor, never letting Ana go. Her heart fluttered in her chest. Hunter’s face didn’t give anything away. Ana hoped that was because he was serious about one thing: getting out of the ballroom with Ana. They exited the dance floor through a gap within the white silk curtains draping the walls. Pushing them aside slightly, he exposed a glass door leading to a balcony. Lit up with magnificent twinkling lights, it looked like they were walking on a floor of stars.

They made their way to the end of the balcony that overlooked the ocean. Hunter noticed what she was admiring. “It’s a beautiful view, isn’t it?” He said but he wasn’t looking out, he was looking only at Ana.

Ana inhaled the sea air and took in the magic of the night. It felt like a fairy tale. She knew it would eventually end, since fairy tales always ended with a happily ever after and conveniently forget what happens next. But she was determined to embrace the moment without letting the inevitable fear of betrayal creep in.

“So, tell me, was this an elaborate joke to get me alone out here?” Ana asked cheekily, wishing they could have a repeat of their first night together while also hoping there truly was a dream job offer for her.

Hunter laughed and put his arms around Ana’s petite waist. “Okay, business first, I suppose.” He stepped back from her but kept his hands around her.

“There’s a new department opening in the company. Starling Enterprises. Heard of it?”

Ana's mouth dropped. Starling Enterprises was a multibillion-dollar company and one of the biggest in the city. *They'd heard of her?*

Ana shook her head in disbelief and closed her mouth. "And what, you want me to . . .?"

"I want you to come and join us as our head of sales."

Ana raised her lips in a half smile. She didn't want to sound ungrateful, but she felt a slight disappointment. She looked down at her hands. She'd been head of sales for a good part of three years, and she was ready to progress.

"You're already head of sales, I know, but this comes with a lot of benefits and a pretty hefty pay increase."

Ana thought about what this might mean for her career and her future. She was being held back from any kind of advancement by The Old Boys Club, and this might give her more of a ladder to climb in a huge international company.

"I'd like to think about it," Ana told him. Hunter's smile never once wavered from his face as he pulled Ana closer to him.

"Can we move past the business, then?" He kissed her lips tenderly before wordlessly unleashing what was really on his mind. His hands hungrily explored her body. She hesitated, looking behind him to see if anyone was coming.

Hunter laughed. "Relax. No one will come out here. They're all too busy being wowed by everything going on inside."

Ana looked at him, surprised. He seemed used to this. She was not a prude, but she already felt out of place. Being caught having sex on a balcony at the fanciest party she had ever been to would definitely make her feel uncomfortable.

Hunter pulled away from Ana, sensing her discomfort. He took her hand and leaned against the balcony. Ana apologized and touched his face with her gloved hand. She stroked the back of his neck, causing him to groan.

"I just wanted to relive the other night," he explained with a desire in his eyes that she had never seen before, it was as if he was hungry for *her*. He pulled Ana up against him. She could feel his arousal, and it caused her body to tighten in excitement. His hands gripped her body as they locked lips, tongues intertwining. The lingering taste of mint in his mouth met her tongue. The smell of his aftershave that continuously invaded her dreams impaled her senses. His lips were warm and soft against hers. Boldly, Ana reached down, discreetly unzipping his pants as he lifted

her gown. Lifting Ana up, he perched her against the edge of the balcony. Ana moaned as he kissed her neck tenderly. She moved her hands down his length as he pulled down her lace underwear. He groaned as he kissed her again and then thrust inside of her. Ana bit her lip, suppressing the urge to moan at the pleasure she felt. He moved inside of her amidst the twinkling lights surrounding them on the balcony, her pleasure building. She hoped this fairy tale would never end.

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