

Fighting the urge to fidget, Harvey scuffs his shoe on the curb outside Donna's apartment building, waiting for her to appear. It's been two months since she took long service leave, and he uses the culmination of time that's passed to rationalize his nerves. Eight weeks of minimal contact is the longest they've gone whilst being on good terms. Albeit, terms that took some cultivating when she blindsided him with the request to take time off.

Donna's words insinuated there was a choice but her lips allured otherwise, her supple pout challenging his straight up *no*, the stages of bargaining, then his final plea that he couldn't lose both her and Mike in on breathe. He staked the ground with emotional blackmail, rolling the odds back in his favor, but then her hazel eyes watered and twelve years hit him like a freight train.

He was growing too familiar with *that* look, and being suckerpunched by his own guilt. Being cast in some play was a big deal to her. If he was going to feel shitty regardless, putting her needs first was the only right move forward.

After an aching long run up to her closing night — a wait made longer by Donna's inability to be on time — he suddenly feels a charge in the warm night air. His sixth sense is rewarded by a cobalt blue dress, accentuated by Donna's beaming smile as her heels traverse the stoop down to the street.

Air rushes into his lungs, his nervousness spilling into a grin that ushers his feet forward. From behind his back, he flourishes a bouquet of long-stemmed roses.

Donna's manicured finger extends with a wiggle. "Who are those for?"

"They were for Ray but he's more of an orchid man."

Donna laughs, her heart skipping with delight as she accepts roses and brushes her nose against the velvety petals. Mixed in with the rich vanilla scent is a hint of Harvey's sandalwood cologne, breeding a familiarity she's missed. Her gaze roams over his sharp suit and relaxed features. It's good to see him. "They're beautiful, Harvey. Thank you."

A soft smile trails her appreciation, which in turn seems to open a small bridge of uncertainty. His chest rises and his lips part with a tease of possibility, then his shoulders drop away from her.

"Come on." Harvey hooks his grasp under the door handle of the Lexus, lifting it with a small click. "We shouldn't keep your legions of fans waiting."

"I wouldn't dare." She palms her chest with a gasp and Harvey chuckles.

"In character already I see."

Sweeping her hand over the door frame, Donna flutters her lashes, slipping into her best British accent. "*Darling...*" she drawls, "you'll know when I'm acting."

Her finger traces the ridges on his tie and Harvey lets out a throaty laugh when she flounces her hair and slides into the car. *She's a convincing seductress, he can't deny that.*

Closing the door, he rounds the back of the Lexus, wiping his clammy palm down the side of his trousers. On the cusp of entering his late forties, he shouldn't be prone to butterflies, but Donna's effect on him is inescapable.

Waiting for a lull in traffic, he climbs into the Lexus, buckling in as Donna and Ray chat animatedly, catching up like kids on the playground. He checks the time, subtly clearing his throat and prompting an eye roll from Donna.

"Sheesh. Anyone would think you're the one performing tonight." She winks at Ray. "Mr. Uptight back here."

Ray glances between the pair in his review, then focuses his attention on steering away from the curb. "I have no comment."

"Smart man." Harvey smiles smugly at Donna, leaning over. "You're seriously not nervous? Last night, last impressions. All the critics will be watching."

"Do I look nervous to you?"

She doesn't. And confidence has always been strikingly attractive on her. "So? Review in the New York Times? A Tony Award? What's the gameplay?"

Donna casually flips her hair. "Both. Just because this is an Off-off Broadway low budget production, doesn't mean I won't make headlines."

"I'm sure." Harvey smirks. "Though you might want to try being a little more humble in your acceptance speech."

"Please, being humble is a Paulsen trait."

"Just not a *Donna* one."

He bubbles her name with air quotes and she laughs, grinning across at him. "Aren't you the one who always says it's not bragging if it's true?"

"Ray, I think we might need some music."

His childish distraction tickles Donna's amusement as the car veers toward the business district in lower Manhattan, a low hum of upbeat jazz causing Harvey's palm to tap against his knee.

They've driven into the city together like this countless times before, only they won't be bypassing the glitz and glamor of Broadway, they'll be stepping into it. Her gaze stretches out searching for the brightly lit part of town. She's excited, a buzz humming through as she indulges the fragrance of her roses once more.

Her passion for the stage is fueled by the shower of accolades she receives from strangers, but nameless faces are no comparison to family. She's ready to go home, back to the people she misses and the job she loves. "How was the temp? Any trouble?"

Harvey shrugs. "Why? Don't tell me you want to retire now that you're rich and famous."

"I went to Broadway, not Hollywood. My fortune is in peanuts."

"At least you'd make a great stewardess." His lips quirk, eyes boldly dropping to her exposed, shapely calves. When he checks back in, her bemused expression makes him gulp.

"Say that to me again," she dares. "But this time imagine I'm serving a scalding hot coffee over your lap."

"I said.... you're a great COO."

"That's what I thought."

She wiggles her shoulders triumphantly and Harvey chuckles under his breath, grateful she doesn't circle back to the topic of work. He doesn't want to dwell on how empty the office felt without her. He'd rather think about Monday, when she's back where she belongs.

They carry a light conversation for the rest of the journey, until the Lexus rolls to a stop behind The Hayes Theatre. The car's warning system activates when Donna prematurely unbuckles her seatbelt, excitedly thanks Ray, and leaves Harvey no time to be chivalrous as she bounds out of the vehicle.

"As if she was never gone, Sir."

Harvey nods at Ray's warm smile. He agrees, only wishes she hadn't ascended in the first place. "Enjoy your evening, Ray." Dismissing his driver for the night, quick strides place him next to Donna at the theater's backstage entrance. He pulls on the rustic handle, the hinges turning with a low creak.

Her eyes shimmer as they land on him, and his reward for weeks of thinly veiled patience is her toes lifting and the ghostly tingle of her lips brushing his cheeks. She smiles radiantly as her heels fall flat and he's distracted by a fluttering thrill.

"You're supposed to say, break a leg," she teases.

The edges of his mouth relax. "Why? So you can have even more time off?"

"Lucky you'd make a great candy striper."

She pointedly checks out his legs and he laughs, "okay, you win." He smiles, nodding inside. "Go on, beautiful, break a leg."

He's rewarded again, this time by a faint blush covering her cheeks as she sheepishly follows his instruction. He grinds the heavy weight of the door closed behind her, his breezy charisma replaced by an intelligible apprehension.

In just over an hour, he'll see her again, but when he turns streetside, scanning for somewhere to grab a bite to eat, the haunting feeling lingers.

For two months he purposely kept his distance, not wanting to taint her happiness with his insecurities. Under the guise of watching the NBA playoffs, Mike — *kid thinks he's Yoda now he has his own firm* — he actually managed to keep his head screwed on straight.

But Ray was right, seeing Donna tonight, it's like she was never gone, and the sense of loss clinging to him might not feel so daunting if he'd made an attempt to take this journey with Donna.

Steering around couples together on the street, his feet bypass the decent restaurants in favor of the terrible Thia place Donna loves that's just around the corner.

He's a creature of habit and finds comfort in the familiar — even when that turns out to be spending an inconspicuous amount of time searching the menu for something that won't give him the shits or sweats.

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The backstage entrance to The Hayes Theatre is a weathered labyrinth of desperate repair. Fitting for the 1900's adaptation of Moulin Rouge that Donna is starring in. She doesn't care that the building is small and she has to share a dressing room with twenty people — she loves the quaint charm of being a big fish in a small pond.

Despite joking with Harvey in the car, she isn't interested in glory or fame. Twenty years ago her younger self thought differently, but this time around, doing the show has been a process for healing. A decision she didn't come to lightly.

Auditioning for the low-budget production was supposed to be a simple distraction, a healthier alternative to nights spent at home with pizza and Netflix mourning the loss of Rachel and Mike. Then Robert became managing partner, Louis announced his desire to become a father and Harvey rekindled his passion for law not red tape politics.

Her life felt lacking by comparison.

And even though signing up for a glorified bootcamp has been grueling and challenging — at times downright exhausting — it's also been titular and exciting, the break she needed from monotony. Reconnecting with long-time theater alumni has boosted her social morale and that's worth more than any trophy.

"Here's our Audrey Hepburn, now."

Donna is welcomed into the dressing room by a round of vibrant jollity, the ensemble cast applauding her arrival. "Please... go on." Her smile breaks into a grin as Kylian — her on stage lover — slings his arm around her shoulders, pressing a kiss to her cheek. She playfully pushes his chest. "You put them up to this."

"I am a mere humble man in love, Miss Satine." He smirks, winking at her bouquet of roses. "But alas, it seems another has laid claim to your heart."

"Keep talking, Donahue, and I'll trade my breath mints for garlic."

The small group laughs and she fends off their sharp gossip talons with a wave. The interest in her non-existent love life has been rife and she turns away their invested interest with a clap. "Let's go, people. These faces aren't going to beautify themselves."

A low rumble of excited chatter fills the small room as the cast disperses and Donna crosses over to her make-up station which neighbors Estelle. The vivacious brunette was her ride and die in the early noughties, the pair of them toughing it out on minimum wage to land auditions.

As soon as Donna puts her purse down, she holds up a finger. "Don't."

Estelle chuckles, shaking her head as Donna slips out the vase the woman had secreted away.

As if Harvey wasn't going to show up with ridiculously expensive flowers.

"You need to wise up and marry that man."

With no shame, she reaches over and steals Donna's purse. Her friend's make-up is already stage perfect and she fishes out the small assortment of Dior touch-up cosmetics.

"I could be Einstein, wouldn't change the fact that Harvey and I aren't in a relationship."

"Didn't Einstein marry his cousin?"

Donna finishes placing the roses and steals her lip plumping gloss back. "So, incest is where we're setting the bar? Geez, no wonder your dating advice has always been shitty."

"Hey, if you want to pretend there's nothing going on with Mr. Boss Man, who hasn't missed your closing night in ten years, I'll believe you." Estelle dips her brush and feathers her face with Donna's compact powder. "You are the better actress after all."

The woman's challenging gaze meets Donna's through the mirror, and Donna puckers her smirk. "Back-handed compliments will get you nowhere."

"Just like Harvey. I'm surprised his blue balls haven't fallen off."

"Sush! Someone is going to overhear and think you're serious."

Estelle fights a laugh, then leans over to gently squeeze Donna's wrist. "Go, get that fine ass into costume. Tonight isn't about Mr. Moneybags. It's about you." She's being serious, but heavens to murgatroyd — exit stage left.

The woman needs to get over Harvey or *under* him, whichever works fastest.

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In the darkened theater, Harvey shifts awkwardly in his chair, anxiously awaiting Donna's appearance on stage. He tries to associate the cramped and packed space with a Yankie's game, but the musky smell sticks in his nose, contaminating his lukewarm beer.

Finally the lights dim for the second time.

He checks his watch.

Seven minutes already feels like an hour.

Where the hell is she?

A knee knocks his seat again and he huffs, regretting taking Louis' advice. The man *insisted* he sit center to front stage, but he would have been much more at home in a row up the back.

Itching to swap to seats, he swallows the compulsion when a low, sultry singing voice protrudes from the pitch black stage.

"The French are glad to die for love. They delight in fighting duels. But I prefer a man who lives, and gives expensive jewels."

His antsiness immediately vanishes, replaced by juvenile incoordination when a spotlight falls on Donna's diamond encrusted cleavage and ruby red lips. Beer splashes over his trousers as her voice bellows out across the crowd, her gaze locking in on his direction.

Thank you Louis and the heaven's above.

The moment vanishes quickly and he lets out a breath as she turns, running her hand teasingly through the throng of men falling at her feet on stage. She continues to strut and sing, her eyes always falling back to the mid-center crowd, and the number ends with a boisterous round of applause and cheers.

Clapping his palm against his thigh, he drowns his surprise with a guzzle, wishing he had something stronger in his plastic cup. The character and starring role is unlike any performance he's seen from Donna, and he's proud, thrilled for her, but a shadow of guilt casts itself over his pride.

Did his career hold hers back? She's always been passionate about theater, but what if *this* is the *more* she sometimes alludes to never having.

He slinks back in seat.

If Donna had wanted this life for herself she would have it. Not even his doubt can break through scene after scene of her talented enchantment. Satine's final dying moment doesn't leave a dry eye in the house and is rewarded by a standing ovation.

He springs up from his chair, not to award her with praise. The rest of the audience has that covered and she won't see him in the dark crowd, anyway. He takes the opportunity to slip out before the final act and curtain call.

It would be easy to leave altogether. Unlike Donna this isn't his scene. He prefers intimate affairs, rhyme and reason from jurors, not gushing fans. But he wants — needs — to see her, assure himself that she's still coming back to the firm and hasn't changed her mind.

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Floating on cloud nine after the show, Donna approaches her dressing table, her giddiness suddenly overcast by a dim shadow. The vase she carefully left out of arm's reach, shattered in pieces on the floor, Harvey's roses wilting in a trickle of murky water.

Estelle takes the bouquet Donna was gifted during the final curtain call, mirth in her voice as she scoffs under her breath. "Damn, stage-hands. Don't know their elbows from their asses."

The trampled petals don't seem like an accident the crew would overlook, Donna's brows furrowing as she kneels down, trying to salvage the crushed stems.

"Babe, you shouldn't — "

"Is this a bad time?"

A smooth and sexy as sin voice turns Estelle's head, her eyes roaming over Harvey Specter — the man who defies aging like a fine wine. Her ego takes a hit when he pays zero attention to her tightly drawn corset, his casual indifference switching to concern.

"Donna, *hey*, be *careful*."

Estelle takes a fast step back, narrowly avoiding a collision as Harvey, society's elite, barrels down onto his knees to sweep Donna's hands away from the glass.

Jesus, her ovaries just exploded.

She *really* needs to go out and get laid tonight. "Donna, sweetie, honey... I love you, but if you're not ready in fifteen minutes, I'm dragging you to the after party in that negligee."

The woman's vanishing words steer Harvey's attention to the diamond-studded peach slip Donna's wearing. From his seat in the crowd, the costume looked far less scandalous than it does with her ass bent over while she purposefully ignores him.

"Donna, *stop*." His voice is embarrassingly strained, and he clears his throat when she falls back on her knees throwing him a questioning look.

"Go get changed, I'll clean this up."

Donna's brows furrow at his tight smile, then — *of course*. He probably has somewhere else to be. She's being ridiculous, fussing over nothing. "I'll get someone from the stage crew."

"Why?" He smirks. "You think I don't know what a broom looks like?"

"I'm sure you know what one *looks* like." Her lips quirk, then she breathes out a soft sigh. "Seriously, Harvey, I appreciate you being here tonight. You've done more than enough."

The veiled dismissal — the gratitude in her warm gaze — releases his guilt from a well-fortified holding cell. After her performance, he realized he gave her the bare minimum of support, did shit all really. Turning up at the eleventh hour doesn't make him a hero.

A locker slams and Estelle's shrill voice calls out, "Ten minutes, people! Last one to the bar buys the first round!"

Harvey quickly sobers his guilt. There's an entire cast of people wanting to celebrate Donna tonight, including Estelle, who is a goddamn battle ax. "Jesus Christ, that woman is Norma reincarnate."

"Hey, don't speak ill of the dead. Or Estelle. She'll hear you and you'll be the one leaving in this negligee."

At least *he* wouldn't send half the men in Manhattan to an early grave. "Come on." He extends an open palm. "Forget about the flowers. They only die, anyway."

"Such a romantic."

She takes his hand and he pulls them up, steering her away from the broken glass. There's an opening to tell her how amazing she was tonight, but he fumbles it when she casually steals the moment.

"Do you want to wait? We can share a cab downtown."

"Actually, I'm going to head home." He catches a flash of surprise in her gaze. True, in the past he would have made the most of a Friday night out, but lately he's been preferring his own company.

"Oh and uh, you won't be needing a cab. There's a limo parked out front."

Donna's jaw goes slack. "*You* hired a limo?"

"Cheaper than buying one."

He grins smugly and Donna revels in giddy excitement. "Then you should come with us. I *swear* it won't be like last time. Jean Paul is happily married and he doesn't even own a hot tub anymore."

Her teasing smile soothes his horrific memory of the *incident* — and tempts him. If it were just the two of them, he'd gladly take her out to celebrate. However, the growing rumble of chatter signals a prelude to him awkwardly standing alone at the bar, mentally restraining himself from glaring daggers at her on-stage love interest. "Tonight is about you. Go, have fun. You deserve

it."

"Donna Roberta Paulsen! That sexy little ass of yours had better be moving!"

Estelle calls out again and Harvey nudges Donna toward the sound. "You heard her."

"I'll see you on Monday," she promises. "Goodnight, Harvey."

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As soon as Harvey arrives home, he pulls out his phone, moving to his decanter. The quickest route to Mike's number is through his recent calls, his thumb hovering over the outgoing list which is all clients, with the exception of his best friend.

The reality is depressing and jolts him into realizing he has no desire to revisit the shame he's attached to Donna's phenomenal performance. Tucking the device away, he pours himself a drink, choosing to mull over the night alone.

After shedding his jacket and tie, he drops into his favorite chair, his thighs spread wide over the leather ridges.

He feels like shit.

The excitement on her face when he picked her up, then when he mentioned the limo, is a drop in the ocean compared to all the moments he chose not to be a part of, because, *Jesus*, she's so goddamn talented that it fucking scared him when she decided to put her needs above the firm's — above *his*.

Downing half his glass, he moves his hand from the arm rest to the inseam of his trousers, inhaling deeply and exhaling the panic that's been nesting inside him for two months. In spite of all his shortcomings, he and Donna are fine.

As if she never left, Sir.

Ray's affirmation drifts through his mind. Monday everything goes back to normal, with one small exception. Satine was the seductress in Moulin Rouge, but it was Donna's tantalizing red lips that breathed life into the character. In a crowd of one hundred people it was easy to disassociate, but now he's finally able to relax, unfiltered thoughts of Donna's peach negligee instantly get him hard.

A groan spills into his glass as he cups his groin, attempting restraint, but failing as he moves to unbutton his pants. Since Donna gained a new starring role, she's been absent in his fantasies — another regret to add to his list when he's capable of thinking straight again.

Right now, he doesn't give a fuck.

He sinks back as he strokes his length, the vision of Satine building his arousal, but Donna's breathy accent doesn't sustain the low coil in his gut. He doesn't want a charade. What turns him on is thinking about going out with her tonight, staking his claim and making sure everyone knew how proud he was while skating his hand possessively up her thigh.

Fuck.

Fear has always kept his fantasies attached to raw need, but pre-cum spreads between his fingers as he gets off on wanting something else — something *more*.

Shifting his hips, he thrusts vigorously and climaxes into oblivion, a hollowness chasing his descent back down to earth. He pants, glancing down at the glass which toppled down onto the carpet, making less of a mess than he did.

His breathing slows.

Something something darkside.

as more regret piles up. He keeps adapting to torment. Maybe it's time to make a change.