

*Today's weather forecast: imminent shitstorms across the Tri-State area.*

Roxy Cumberland's footsteps echoed off the smooth, cream-colored walls of the hallway, high heels clicking along the polished marble. When she caught her reflection in the pristine window overlooking Stanton Street, she winced. This pink bunny costume wasn't doing shit for her skin tone. A withering sigh escaped her as she tugged the plastic mask back into place.

Singing telegrams still existed. Who knew? She'd actually laughed upon seeing the tiny advertisement in the *Village Voice's* Help Wanted section, but curiosity had led her to dial the number. Her laughter had stopped abruptly when she'd heard exactly how much people were willing to pay in exchange for her humiliation. So here she was, one day later, preparing to sing in front of a perfect stranger for a cut of sixty bucks.

Sixty bucks might not sound like much, but when your roommate has just booted you onto your ass for failure to come through on rent—again—leaving you no place to live, and your checking account is gasping for oxygen, pink bunnies do what pink bunnies must. At least her round, fluffy tail would cushion her fall when her ass hit the sidewalk.

See? She'd already found a silver lining. Maybe the shitstorm would hold.

Or not. Over the last week, she'd been on thirteen auditions, trudging on blistered feet between callbacks and will-definitely-never-call-backs, smiling and reciting lines for bored production executives. Toothpaste commercials, walk-on rolls for daytime

soaps...hell, she'd even auditioned to play a mother in a diaper rash ad. They'd all but laughed her twenty-one-year-old ass out of the building.

Too bad they couldn't touch her. Nothing and nobody could. She was from New fucking Jersey.

While Roxy usually kept that fact to herself, she couldn't help but admit that Jersey had prepared her for this constant rejection. It had given her the brass balls to say "their loss" every single time someone in a business suit decided her acting skills weren't good enough. That *she* wasn't good enough. One word kept her going, kept her boarding the subway to another audition. *Someday*. Someday she would look back at this pre-stardom experience and be grateful for it. She'd cozy up to Ryan Seacrest on the red carpet and have a damn good story to tell. Although she might just leave out the pink bunny suit.

Unfortunately, on days like today, when a shitstorm cloud was riding low above her head, following her everywhere she went, *someday* seemed a long way off. Sixty dollars couldn't plug the hole in the shitcloud, it could only keep her eating properly for the next week. As far as her living situation went, she'd figure something out. If it meant taking the bus to Jersey and sneaking into her old bedroom for the night, she'd bite the bullet. The next morning, she'd slip her feet back into her heels and get back to pounding the pavement, her parents never being the wiser.

Through the eyeholes of the bunny mask, Roxy glanced down at the piece of paper in her hand. Apartment 4D. Based on the song she'd memorized on the way here and the swank interior of the building, she knew the type who would answer the door. Some too-rich, middle-aged douchebag who was so bored with his life that he needed to be

entertained with novelties like singing bunny rabbits. He'd close the door when she finished, text his main squeeze some emoticon-heavy thank-you, and forget all about this little diversion on his way to play indoor tennis.

Roxy's gaze tracked down lower on the note in her hand, and she felt an uncomfortable kick of unease in her belly. She'd met her new boss at a tiny office in Alphabet City, surprised to find a dude only slightly older than herself running the operation. Always suspicious, she'd asked him how he kept the place afloat. There couldn't be *that* high a demand for singing telegrams, right? He'd laughed, explaining that singing bunnies only accounted for a tenth of their income. The rest came in the form of *strip-o-grams*. She'd done her best to appear flattered when he'd told her she'd be perfect for it.

Would she go that far? Taking her clothes off for strangers paid a damn sight more than sixty bucks. It would be so easy for her to take that leap. As an actress, she had the ability to detach herself and become someone else. Being the object of attention didn't bother her; it was what she'd trained herself for. That kind of income would guarantee her a place to live, allow her to continue auditioning without worrying about her next meal. So why the hesitation?

She ran a thumb over the rates young-dude-boss had jotted down on the slip of paper. Two hundred dollars for each ten-minute performance. God, the *security* she would feel with that kind of money. And yet, something told her that once she took that step, once she started taking off her clothes, she would never stop. It would become a necessity instead of a temporary patch-up of her shitstorm cloud.

*Think about it later. When you're not dressed like the fucking Trix Rabbit.* Roxy took a deep, fortifying breath, the same one she took before every audition. She wrapped her steady fingers around the brass door knocker and rapped it against the wood twice. A frown marred her forehead when she heard a miserable groan come from inside the apartment. It sounded like a *young* groan. Maybe the douchebag had a son? Oh, *cool*. She definitely wanted to do this in front of someone in her age group. Perfect.

Her sarcastic thought bubble burst over her head when the door swung open, revealing a guy. A hot-as-hell guy. A naked-except-for-unbuttoned-jeans guy. Being the shameless hussy she was, her gaze immediately dipped to his happy trail, although, on this guy, it really should have been called a rapture path. It started just beneath his belly button, which sat at the bottom of beautifully defined ab muscles. But they weren't the kind of abs honed from hours in the gym. No, they were natural, I-do-sit-ups-when-I-damn-well-feel-like-it abs. Approachable abs. The kind you could either lick or snuggle up against, depending on your mood.

Roxy lassoeed her rapidly dwindling focus and yanked it higher until she met his eyes. Big mistake. The abs were child's play compared to the face. Stubbled jaw. Bed head. Big, Hershey-colored eyes outlined by dark, black lashes. His fists were planted on either side of the door frame, giving her a front-row seat to watch his chest and arms flex. A lesser woman would have applauded. As it was, Roxy was painfully aware of her bunny-costumed status, and even *that* came in second place to the fact that Approachable Abs was so stinking rich that he could afford to be nursing a hangover at eleven in the morning. On a Thursday.

He dragged a hand through his unkempt black hair. “Am I still drunk, or are you dressed like a rabbit?”

His voice was rough from sleep. Probably not his usual voice. That had to be the reason her tummy did a backflip. “I’m dressed like a rabbit.”

“Okay.” He tilted his head. “*Should* I be drunk for this?”

“If anyone should be drunk for this, it’s me.”

“Good point.” He jerked his thumb back toward his dark apartment. “I think there’s some tequila left—”

“You know what?” *This is my life right now. How did I get here?* “I think I’m all set.”

He nodded once, as if out of respect for her decision. “So what now?”

“Are you...” She consulted her slip of paper through the round eyeholes. “Louis McNally?”

“Yeah.” He leaned against the doorjamb and considered her. “I was named after my grandfather. So, technically, I’m Louis McNally the Second. How’s that for fancy?”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Just making small talk.”

“Is this a typical Thursday exploit for you? Get a lot of forest creatures on your doorstep?”

“You’d be the first.”

“Well, then. Call me Pink Bunny the First. How’s that for fancy?” When he laughed, she was grateful for the mask that hid her unexpected smile. Honestly, this situation was getting more ridiculous by the minute. She definitely didn’t have time for

this. At one o'clock she was auditioning for a small theater company's ironic production of *Lassie. Priorities, Roxy.*

"You sound cute." He squinted at her, as if attempting to see through the plastic mask. "You cute under there, bunny?"

"Being that your one-night stand from last night sent me here to sing for you, I don't know if that matters," she answered sweetly.

"Cute girls trump all." One dark eyebrow rose. "What was that about singing?"

Roxy cleared her throat, letting the horrifically stupid lyrics imprint on her brain. Lyrics she hadn't written, thanks God. The sooner she got this over with, the sooner she could get out of the suffocating costume and forget this ever happened. Until tomorrow. When she was scheduled to dress like a giant bumble bee. For fuck sake.

*Make every performance count.* Channeling Liza Minnelli, she cocked one hip and raised the opposite hand.

*To my hot shot honey bunny*

*Last night we went places and had some fun-ny*

*You brought me home and we skipped the small talk*

*Now I'm daydreaming about your perfect—*

"Stop." Louis shook his head slowly. "Jesus, please, make it stop."

Roxy let her hand drop to her side. "You better be complaining about the lyrics and not my singing."

"I—sure." He scanned the hallway, looking relieved when he saw that none of his neighbors had overheard. "Who did you say sent you?"

She stared back at him, dumbfounded. Not that he could tell with the mask hiding her face. “You had more than one girl over last night?”

“I was celebrating,” he said defensively. “Don’t be a judgmental rabbit. They’re the worst.”

“O-kay, my work is done here.” She turned tail—*literally*—and started walking back toward the elevator. Over her shoulder, she called, “Zoe sent me. You might want to write that down.”

“Is she the redhead?” Louis called back. When Roxy stopped in her tracks, he smiled to let her know he’d been kidding. Maybe. “Hold up. Can you just wait here a second? I should give you a tip.”

As he fumbled in his jeans pocket, Roxy smirked. “Which tip are we referring to here? I *did* just sing an ode to your penis.”

“Please don’t remind me.” He drew a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet, pinching it between his fingers. “Just one request, though. I want to see your face first.”

Roxy felt a stab of irritation. What the hell did it matter what she looked like? Everywhere she went, every part she read for, critical eyes poked and prodded her. Too thin. Too curvy. Too tall. Too short. *Never* what they wanted. And just this morning, she’d been told she had a stripper’s body. The fact that this wealthy party guy was holding money over her head in order to judge her appearance only tripled her annoyance. “Why? If you like what you see, will you invite me inside? You haven’t even showered off the last girl yet.”

He actually had the grace to look a little ashamed. “I—”

Roxy didn't give a shit about his answer. "Would you expect me to be flattered?" She clutched her chest dramatically. "Please, oh keeper of the golden penis, let me worship at your flawless phallus."

"Careful." His shame morphed into irritation. "You're starting to sound a little jealous to me."

"*Jealous?*" Oh, that did it. The shitstorm cloud above her head darkened, lightning bolts shooting through its sides. Kicked out of her apartment, not a single callback in weeks, and leaning toward stripping. He'd caught her on a bad fucking day. Honestly, good days were getting harder to come by, and right now, she could think of only one thing that would help. Wiping the smug superiority off the Penis Prince's face.

She bit down on her lips to plump them up, then reached up and removed the mask. Satisfaction danced in her bloodstream when his jaw went slack, brown eyes melting into a deeper shade. *That's right, buddy. I ain't half bad.* As she strode toward him, he straightened from the doorjamb, a groan working its way free of his throat. He saw the intention in her expression, knew what was coming. It didn't escape her that even though she wore a thick pink bunny suit, he was looking at her like she wore a string bikini. Louis McNally the Second was an interesting character, she'd give him that.

"Jealous?" she repeated before shoving him into the apartment, bringing his back up against the inside wall just beside the door. "Sweetheart, I would rock your world."

Not giving him a chance to respond, she surged up on her toes and melded their mouths together. *Ohhh, snap.* There was zero hesitation on his part, just a long, expert pull of her lips. As if she'd let go of a trapeze and he'd caught her in midair. The kiss hit the



ground running, mouths opening, tongues fighting to take the lead. One strong hand found her chin and pulled it down further, allowing him to slant his head and deepen the kiss even further. Shock exploded behind her eyes, and she swayed a little under the wave of heat. *Affected.* He was affecting her in a way she wasn't familiar with. She'd kissed a lot of guys, but she'd never felt dread over the idea of stopping. Louis pushed his tongue deeper, making a hungry sound and sending it vibrating into her mouth. She echoed it. Louder. Her head fell back and he moved with her, keeping their lips locked together, as if he couldn't allow her to get away. What was happening here? She was losing control of the situation. *Get it back.*

Roxy pulled back and sucked in a deep breath. His mouth was damp and parted as he tried to draw in his own oxygen, his face a mask of stunned disbelief. "Who the hell *are* you?"

Swallowing the odd feeling in her throat, she plucked the twenty-dollar bill out of his fingers. "I'm gone."

She blew into the hallway, sensing him staring after her. With as much dignity as one could muster while dressed like a pink bunny, she bypassed the elevator and took the stairs, two at a time.