
NO SHOW

THE RED LIGHT ON THE ANSWERING MACHINE blinked incessantly, flashing “25” like a homing beacon. I hadn’t checked any of my messages since going home. Let’s face it—a vacation isn’t a vacation if you can’t get away.

There were two from Mitch, about the dinner at Vielle Cardin, where many stars were going to be honoring a retiring member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences. Rumor had it we were going to get a sneak peek of the Oscar nominees. Don’t forget to wear your new Versace hun, his recorded voice said. I expect your sparkle and shine to be turned up to a million volts.

There was another message from David, wondering why I hadn’t called in a few weeks. Hope you had a good time with your folks, his voice said from the tiny speaker. They’ll always be there.

I hit the delete button repeatedly until the light stopped blinking. Finally the number “0” stared back at me, blank and hollow. I smiled and looked around my new room, taking notice of the way the sculptured cornice butted beautifully against the ceiling. The interior designers didn’t miss a thing. I kicked my suitcase off the bed and stretched out, throwing my wig on the freshly-waxed oak floor. It slid across the surface effortlessly and butted up against the baseboard in the corner.

The red light on the answering machine blinked at the side of my head like a silent alarm clock. I sat up and opened my eyes to a dark room. What time is it? Can traveling ever frazzle me. Talk about contents shifting during flight.

The message window now reads “4”. They’re all Mitch.

“Mandy—it’s ten to seven,” the first one said. “Where are you? The ceremony starts in fifteen minutes—check that—ten minutes.”

Then the next one—“Mandy! They’re introducing Jeremy now—what’s going on? I’ve been getting looks all night!”

The third message was a hang up, but the caller ID confirmed Mitch. The final message was several hours later, and it was almost just as long.

“Who the hell do you think you are!” His recorded voice accused. I could hear some traffic noise in the background, he called from his car. “Standing me up at a high-profile event like that? Are you out of your fucking mind! They were asking about you all night! What the fuck you clueless bitch! Jerry Sloan was laughing at me!”

There was a cracking noise, it sounded like Mitch was slamming his phone against the steering wheel. A car honked in the background. “Jerry Sloan—you know who the hell he is right? Or has that already slipped your ditzy self-serving brain? Huh? You know what he said? ‘A leading man is never complete without his leading lady, is he now?’ Who the fuck do you think you are putting me in that position? You’re just another face and a body! You think you’re something special? Do you know how many there have been before you? Do you know how many more there will be after you? You think you’ll even be remembered two years from now? Wake up you fucking—”

I hit the delete button and jumped off the bed, almost knocking over a box of clothes from the move. He’s on his way over—I could hear his engine revving on the message—he’s in a hurry, and it’s not to get home in time to catch the end of the Laker game.

The door bashing didn’t sound like it was coming from a fist—more like a battering ram. He was storming the gate to my castle, and

I didn't have a vat of boiling acid to throw at him. A pot of hot coffee would have been just as effective, but I was too exhausted to put one on when I got home.

"Open this door!" The animal raged.

I was in the foyer before I realized my legs had taken me there.

I punched in the code quickly, disengaging the alarm. I turned the bolt.

Mitch shoved me back then slammed the door behind him, locking us in what now felt like a cage instead of my new home.

"You think you'd be anywhere without me!" He jammed his fingers into his chest several times and leered forward, forcing me to back up.

"You wouldn't be able to get a commercial hocking car wax for muscle cars! Even pizza-faced, teenaged Mustang meatheads would turn up their noses at you!"

I flung my hair around my shoulders and shook my head, raising an eyebrow. His face twisted into a snarl of scarlet wrinkles.

The slap wasn't a whip-crack, but he had all of his weight behind it. If he had used a closed fist I would have been out.

Mitch grabbed me by the collar, almost lifting me to my feet by the strength of cotton fibers. I stumbled and he steadied me by the waist so he could get another shot in. This time I fell into him and hung on. But it wasn't like the thing you see in the boxing ring, when one fighter leans on the other because he's tired.

I squeezed and rubbed his back. I moved my hands to his hair and stroked it as well as I could manage. My hands were shaking, but they were steady enough so I didn't pull any of his hair. Imagine if I did.

"I'm sorry honey," I whispered into his ear, ignoring the tingling from my cheek. "Mom was sick and I had to catch a later flight back."

He shoved me back by the shoulders. Only the foyer table prevented me from going down a second time.

"You couldn't have checked your messages? Where the fuck's the damn machine?"

Now he has me by the wrists, flinging me around like a psycho swing-dance partner. I looked in the direction of the bedroom and he yanked me through the door, craning his neck.

The blinking-red light of the answering machine made his eyes bulge. He ripped it and the attached phone from the night table, tearing wires and lines from the wall. He threw them to the floor, the plastic cracks told me both were broken beyond repair. He picked up the answering machine, now rattling with loose parts and jammed it into my face. I couldn't move; he had me by the back of the neck.

"What the fuck is this for you ditzzy prima donna? Huh?" He threw it to the floor again. There was another crack and a rattling of more broken pieces.

I'm on my tip toes but I can still maintain my balance. I reached out and held his waist. I slid my hands lower and caressed his hips. His brow lifted slightly. It isn't much, but it's the opening I need.

I leaned forward, pushing against his outstretched arm. "From now on I'm all ears honey," I said, continuing to push. "You'll never come second again."

His elbow bent and my face came closer until he pulled it all the way into his, still holding me by the collar. I grasped his shoulders and pulled myself up, wrapping my legs around him. I kissed him in the ear several times and ran my hands through his hair again. "Open your mouth honey," I said.

If I was a dentist with a tongue depressor he couldn't have opened wider. I touched his lips with my fingers then attached my mouth like he was a human oxygen tank and I'd just come out of a house full of smoke.

When I finally pulled back the tension exhaled out of his arms and shoulders. I let my legs hang loose and he eased me back to the

ground. I unbuttoned his shirt top to bottom and pushed his shoulders back gently until he sat on the bed. I straddled and squeezed, tugging on his ear lobe with my teeth.

He started to unbutton my blouse, one button at a time.

I reached down and squeezed his hips, letting my hands slide to the more muscular, fuller curves below. "You know those couples that spend years in therapy because they've lost their passion?"

Mitch nodded and I pulled gently on his hair. "You Mitch Robinson," I breathed, "you have all the answers! I've never been so excited in my life."

I leaned forward over his shoulder and cradled the back of his head so he couldn't see my eyes. "Shrinks all over the world should make tapes of you and show them to their patients. That won't just rekindle old flames—it will turn them into bonfires!"

My voice was calm, smooth. There wasn't a single break or stutter. Mitch exhaled deeply again; his entire body was nodding.

"Perhaps I should continue with my little surprises," I said. I'm skating on thin ice, but it's a risk I have to take.

He cradled my bosom and squeezed, his fingers were nimble and forgiving. It worked.

"You are something when you get going like that." I reaffirmed.

I pulled myself closer and put my head behind his shoulder again. My cheek was still raw, but with a little ice it would be fine. In a day or two nobody would notice the difference. Of course, I don't need to tell you about the wonders of make-up. It was hardly anything to be concerned about.

Mitch pulled me back in front of him and stroked my cheek. I held his hand and looked at his eyes. They're relaxed, but that absent, glazed over deer in the headlights expression I was hoping for was nowhere to be found.

He kissed me full on the lips, pushing nicely. The release was

soft, tender and moist. It belonged in a romance novel. A novel, of course, that would quickly turn into a screenplay and a major film production in a matter of months. I would be the female lead. I ran my fingers through Mitch's hair and wondered when I would get the script hand delivered to my doorstep.

Mitch had his hand on the back of my neck, rubbing and caressing. The vice-like squeeze made my stomach jump. No way am I going to let him see it.

"Don't you ever do that to me again."

I nodded twice and puckered.

He shoved me back by the shoulders. My skull missed the headboard by what must have been less than an inch. But close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.

I lifted my head and gently pulled him in. "There's something I'm going to do for you right now," I purred—will the ice crack under my feet this time? "that's going to make you forget what happened."

I kissed and hugged and tugged and caressed in smooth undulating rhythm. The back of his neck, the small of his back, the curves of his chest, the subtle bends of his forearms, the hollows under his eyes. The most underrated and overlooked erogenous zones were my targets, and I was hitting everyone of them with the precision of a guided missile.

Mitch breathed heavy, sighing deeply. His excitement was there, more than I had ever knew it could be, even before all of this craziness. But when he pulled back his eyes were still lucid, alert and penetrating. Throughout the night I kept looking for that time when his eyes would say body present, mind absent but it never came.

I woke up to a shake of the shoulders. It wasn't like the night before, but it wasn't exactly what I'd call comforting.

"Now that you're awake you better make sure you stay awake." He commanded, looking down at me.

I nodded and hugged him. He hugged back, but cut it off before I could give him a second squeeze of reassurance.

Using my shoulders for leverage, he pushed himself up above me for a few seconds and smiled down. I smiled back and reached for him again, but he was already up, pulling on his pants.

"I'm late," he said.

When he was out the door I jumped into the shower, forgetting the fact that I still didn't have the curtain in yet. Water on the tile, who cares. I reached for the lufa and scrubbed, but it wasn't abrasive enough. I went for the washcloth, but the filth ran too deep. I grabbed the pumice stone and finally I started to feel like it was coming off.