



Hot Guy  
Makeover



Bad Boy  
**MAKEOVER**

BRYNN HALE



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# BAD BOY MAKEOVER

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## BAD BOY MAKEOVER INFO

**She needs to bring in an artist to impress her gallery-owner father. He wants to change his bad boy persona and find a new direction in life. Can she help him change his sinfluencing ways or will she find out that like a Picasso-some things are perfect the way they are.**

### **Coco**

I have three passions in life: curating art for a small boutique gallery, crocheting, and finding a man and having a family.

The first two... no problem.

But that last one...

Aren't there any family men out there anymore?

My father puts me in charge of a new exhibit, and I want to impress the only man who's believed in me.

When I run into the latest street artist to make a splash of paint in the world, he runs away like a creative ninja.

Jett is not the high-powered lawyer my father, and frankly, me too, always imagined.

He's dirty, flirty, and smells like danger, but he wants to change.

Will he help me impress my father in exchange for an improvement of his persona? Or will I find out that he's special just the way he is?

### **Jett**

Being a playboy and an influencer- *sinfluencer in my mind* - isn't a job. It's a burden.

I need a slower life, something with someone in it, not being used by women for fortune and fame.

My art is my real life and when a cheerful sprite with pink hair catches me performing my passion, I'm seeing life in a whole new palette of colors.

She needs my art to impress her father, the gallery owner. But I'm not really down to be a pawn, like always.

I soon realize the perfect princess might be my ticket to changing my ways.

Coco is sweet, sexy without knowing it, and takes up room in my heart.

But when her father finds out the truth of our arrangement, he wants to buy me off.

Will I return to my sinfluencing life, or give the woman I love everything she wants that isn't money?

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## COCO

CITIES LIKE THIS NEVER SLEEP. IN THE EARLY HOURS OF DUSK, the city belongs to the early birds getting the worms. No longer are the night owls in control but it's not quite late enough to hand the city back over to the hustlers and bustlers.

It's my favorite time of day. There are people like me, seizing the first light of day, and launching themselves into their work before the world is even awake.

The walk to the gallery I work at is picturesque brownstones and friendly cobblestone paths, with bakeries, florists, cafés, even a twenty-four-hour diner buzzing with activity to start the day. I stop to admire the night owl's song in the form of stretches of city walls tagged with artistry both professional and amateur. My entire life has been dedicated to artists, and I relish in the beauty they throw out into the world whether it be on canvas or brick.

I stop in my tracks, cocking my head as I catch the hissing cry of a can of paint. I step around the corner and spot a hunched figure in one of the wider alleys, a duffel beside them as they throw vivid red streaks across black and white lines. The style seems familiar. I've seen videos of something similar from "The Heartburn." A street artist who in the past few years has built a popular portfolio and more surprisingly, stayed completely elusive.

I cross the street to get a closer look, my sneakers quiet on the pavement. My heels, more suited for the gallery, shoved in my leather bag. What I mistake for a hood on the mysterious artist is actually shoulder-length silky dark hair. It suits the



black leather jacket, t-shirt, and ripped jeans, all of which are black. Like a creative ninja, he's stylish, not grungy, especially with his short, tidy beard.

He freezes when I step on broken glass, crunching under my foot. He hustles, throwing the paint cans into his bag and shouldering it, ready to dash in a heartbeat.

"I'd like to talk to you about your work," I chirp before he can bolt.

"No interviews and no cops," he responds pointedly, his eyes never landing on me.

He must not have gotten a good look at me— I look nothing like a policewoman.

"I'm—" I can't get two words out before he's taken off. "Rude," I huff and take off after him. I've never been known for backing down from a challenge.

I keep pace but give him space to not spook him. In addition to walking everywhere in the city, I run a 5k almost every day. You never know when you need to chase down the next Banksy. And this proves that. He doesn't even look over his shoulder as he flees. Eventually, his sprint dies down to a jog and then a brisk walk.

It's only when he stops an older building that I can slow down, and the architecture catches my eye. Georgian? Neo Classical? It's a blend of a couple.

A doorman welcomes him with a nod and holds the door open. The sign on the building is in a Germanic font: *Haus on Main*. I snap a picture of it and pin the location on my GPS. I hope he's an actual artist and not a stockbroker with a wild streak.

Walking back the way I came, I stop to admire the art he left as I make my way toward work.

The composition is wild and revolutionary all at once, with perfect lines but the bold red makes my heart race. I don't have time to consider it for longer, my little game of cat and mouse is going to make me late.

“Morning!” I shout as enter the gallery. I throw my sneakers into my bag and slip on my heels. My pink pants billow around my legs and match my blazer with the sleeves rolled up. A simple one-strap tank top hugs my torso. One thing about me everyone knows... I love pink. In the art world, you need to pop. You need a signature, and mine is pink. Hair, clothes, nails, decked out in the color head to toe.

“How is it you manage to be so perky?” Albert Danen, the gallery manager, asks me, holding a hand to his temple. He might speak in a perceptively soothing British accent but there is nothing soothing about him. He is stress and temper but he’s also money and reputation.

“I drink my coffee at home,” I remind him. “Not when I get to the gallery.”

He groans. “Two sugars and a cream, Miss Minden,” he waves at me.

It’s not my job to make him coffee... but I do. A new position has opened up and I want to utilize every chance I get to be on Albert’s good side to be the one he suggests for it. I should speak to him more formally too, he likes that.

I slide his coffee towards him and lean on the desk expectantly, waiting for him to tell me about the open position. I only know because this past weekend I had drinks with the curation manager who left the gallery.

“Antonio has left,” Albert sighs after taking his first sip of coffee.

“Okay.” I stand perfectly still, except for my hands wringing themselves tirelessly behind my back.

“Which leaves me in need of a curation manager. I can’t be bothered to baby the artists...”

I’m holding my breath. Is he going to tell me he’s found someone? Is he going to announce it and hope an outsider comes? Or is he going to give me a shot?

“Your father wants me to hire from outside. But I convinced him that we’ll be better off to hire from the inside. He’s reluctant, but I talked him into giving you a trial.”

My father owns the place, but you'd never know it. I've had to apply for every job I wanted here.

Albert continues, "I want you to find me a new artist and manage them and their opening. It will be your trial run for the position."

I inhale sharply, the only thing I can do when I'd rather be squealing and dancing until I'm dizzy.

"But!" He points a stubby finger at me. "Screw this up and you'll be making coffee in the café across the street, not in my gallery."

He has the power. My father listens to Albert like he's an Alexa.

I sweep my fingers through my hair and nod. "We're in need of a feature in our Street Art section," I remind him.

His lip curls and he rolls his eyes at the mention of it.

I add quickly, "I found the perfect artist."

"Already?" He perks up a bit, arching a brow. "Who is it?"

I grin and wink. "I'll handle it, Albert. Enjoy your coffee. I have an artist to hire."

He scowls as I skip away to the second floor where I do most of my work. I settle onto a bench at a bar top set in front of a grand window that overlooks the street. All along the walls behind me are various artworks from artists who have all been featured in this gallery. One day soon an artist I've picked will have their work hanging up here too.

Opening my laptop I get to work, researching The Heartburn to be sure the art I saw and the mysterious leather jacket man are one and the same.

The lines. The feeling. The colors.

*I know where you live...*

## JETT

PINK. PASTEL PINK TO BE SPECIFIC. A COLOR I SELDOM USE, but the color is suited to stand out amongst smog and soot-stained walls. Not the easiest canvas I've worked on but as I recall it, one of the better challenges in my career. It was before my name had the weight it does now.

The color only comes to mind from the woman standing expectantly outside of my building. A pink faux leather jacket hangs off her shoulders, pink sneakers, surprisingly her jeans are a light blue and her top is heather gray, she looks ready for brunch in the Hamptons... except for her shockingly sweet pink hair, bangs cascading over her forehead to slightly cover bright blue eyes.

"Hi. I'm Coco." One of her hands drops from the large pink clutch held at her waist, extending it out to me. "Do you remember me?"

"I'd say you're more cotton candy if anything," I smirk, leaning on the side of the building.

I always have time for sweet treats.

"No, it's my name," she answers with a delicate smile that I feel might be too innocent. "I wanted to talk to you about your art."

My smile drops as fast as my shoulders do and I'm pushing off the wall and past her. "I don't do questions, candy girl."

"Coco," she corrects, hot on my heels, impressed at how she keeps up. "And I know, you said the same thing yesterday."

I'm not here for an interview though."

I round on her, ready to give the same spiel I give all the journalists and bloggers, and vloggers. She probably has a body cam on or someone's filming us.

"I work for a gallery, and I'd like you to be featured in it."

Coco runs into me, not expecting me to stop so abruptly. She apologizes and looks up with those crystal-clear blue eyes. Not a trace of a lie in them.

"Why?"

Coco blinks, looking around as though she might find her explanation written on the walls that it could be that evident.

"Why what?" There's a hint of laughter in her voice but there's no joke even when I feel like the punchline.

"Why do you want me in your gallery?" I squint.

She cocks her head to the side, still confused. "You're an artist. A talented artist. Galleries really want those. The better question would be 'Why wouldn't I want you?'"

My real reputation. My wild past. My unstable future. I can think of at least a dozen reasons why galleries don't touch me anymore.

It hits me hard. She might know where I live, but she has no idea who I am. She's a unicorn of a woman.

"Alright. Walk with me, Bubbleyum."

"Coco," she comments with a smirk, but instead of following me, she steps in beside me.

"Is it just Coco? Are you a modern Madonna?"

"I think Madonna is a modern Madonna." Her remarks make me smile but I quickly wipe it away. I need to play it cool.

"It's Coco Minden."

Our shoulders brush, her long legs easily keeping stride with mine. It's feels like we're truly in step.

“And what gallery does Coco Minden represent? Pinkberry?” I ask.

“Raspberry & Risqué off of 32nd.”

My step stutters as I recognize the name. There’s no way she actually wants me in a place like that. High end is an understatement.

People probably think that I have an ego the size of the Empire State Building, that I can handle any situation with a swagger, but even I know when I’d be out of place.

I drive my hands into my pockets as we cross the street. “That’s an upscale place. Why would you want my art in there?”

“Street art can be upscale. We have an entire section for it. I’d really like to elevate your voice.”

Surprising me, she loops her arm with mine, ensuring she’s keeping up with me. Her arm is warm and light, her cool pink coloring a complimenting opposite to the black of my jacket.

“I need caffeine to consider this, Princess.”

To her credit, she only repeats her name under her breath. I’m not teasing her. Heck, I’ve never felt the need to call any woman anything other than her real name, but this one makes me a little off kilter. And honestly, I’m afraid what’ll happen when I say her name. Just thinking it makes my insides go a little... slippery? Tingly? Wonky?

*And I don’t know what that means yet.*

I steer us off the street and into the next coffee shop that pops up along our path. I urge Coco to order first, slipping my arm free from hers and guiding her forward with my hand low on her back. A blush the same color as her hair covers her high cheeks and she seems surprised at the chivalrous move.

“White chocolate, double shot, please,” she orders. It’s a strong and sweet drink. *Definitely suits her.*

“Americano,” I add as I stop her from digging into her clutch for her card. I hand the barista a \$20 bill. “You hungry? Want a muffin? I don’t think they have candy here.” I wink.

Coco grins and turns to the register. “Add a cake pop please.”

*Perfect.*

Her enigmatic warmth sends a shiver through my body, used to solemn women and hard-to-read facades.

It’ll take more than a coffee to know if I want to do this. And what “this” means, I’m not sure.

When we have our drinks, we settle down at a table away from people. She’s quiet but not shy. Elegant but not a China doll. Adorable but... not mine. And that last one is a kick to the chest. She might be what I really need in my life, not that I’m what she needs in hers. I’ve got life experience baggage for a month trip to Europe.

*Is it okay to even consider this when she doesn’t know the real me?*

While she’s biting into her cake pop, I make my decision.

“I’ll do it.” Her face brightens and I seize the opportunity of her mouth being full to continue. “But I have one condition...”

Her smile drops and the blue of her eyes dims to a gray. “And what are the strings you’re about to attach to this deal?”

I lean back, struggle to find the vulnerability my condition is going to require. “Well, if it helps, you’d be the puppet master and I your marionette.” Her blonde brow rises up quizzically. I wonder if she’s naturally blonde but shake it off because it’ll take my mind to dirtier places than our current conversation involves. “You’re a stylish professional young woman... you probably know stuff.”

“Stuff?” She licks foam from her lip. “I know lots of stuff, sure?”

“Stuff like... cleaning up someone’s act?”

Coco leans forward, folding her arms on the table and eyeing me over. “What do you mean by “act”?”

“You’re offering me a spot in your gallery and you’re really going to tell me you don’t know who I am?” I scoff, shaking my head. She doesn’t know shit.

Her brows knit together at the condescendence of my tone. “No, I know you have talent, and it should be showcased, but no, I don’t know who you are.”

“Think you’ve been living under a rock in that gallery of yours, Princess?”

Coco stands, chair screeching loudly at the abrupt move. It startles me and I almost spit out my drink.

“I believed in your art but you’re not worth being talked down to. Thanks for the coffee.” She grabs her coffee and pointedly bites into the other half of her cake pop. She walks past me and right out the door without another glance my way.

*Shit, I fucked up.*

Being sensitive, even as an artist, isn’t the easiest thing to do, especially with strangers. That’s why I put my feelings into color and shape on walls. I grit my teeth and abandon my table. If I want a shot at changing— a real shot at a better future, I can’t let Coco slip through my fingers.

Out the door I spot a bobbing pink head and jog after it, weaving through the morning traffic of people on the sidewalk.

“Coco, wait! Please!” My heart ticks faster saying her name.

She stops as I call out to her, slowly turning to face me.

She waited, she actually waited for me. My future’s looking fuchsia and bright.

*Or maybe baby pink, but still... I’m not going to screw this up.*



## COCO

IT DOESN'T MATTER THE OCCUPATION; MEN ARE MEN. AT LEAST that's what I've come to expect from them. Similar to the core. They take one look at my height, my bubblyness, and my pink hair and define themselves to be superior, easily sweeping me aside and belittling me while playing their own arrogance up.

But I don't play that game.

I don't need men who insult me and my work, as much as I don't need them in my love life.

I can find someone else to feature. I don't want to, and I was hopeful that maybe behind his expressive eyes I'd find something different than the men before him.

He's just not the one.

But then he's calling my name. He's running after me. Whiskey brown eyes I was ready to forget are wide and on me as I turn to face him.

I could probably outrun him, but I decide to face off with him. I square my body and put my hands to my hips, shoring myself for what's probably going to be gaslighting or half-hearted.

"Coco, I'm so sorry. I messed up."

A shiver runs my spine like lightning. I still. *Is he for real?*

I don't want to play a game or be a pawn. That's happened too many times before. Men out to get my father's money or get an in to his business world. I thought I was getting the

diamond in the rough when he turned into coal. But could he be a diamond?

Searching my face for something other than the disgust it was filled with when I left the table, he closes his eyes and when they reopen, they're sad.

"I'm very sorry," he says again.

"Why...why are you sorry? Are you worried about your reputation? Are you sorry I had to call you out or sorry you spoke to me that way?"

His lips turn up, smirking. He leans forward, into my bubble. "Can't I be sorry for both, Princess?"

I half expect him to bat his eyes at me. He's too flirty for his own good... and I'm afraid for my own good. When he grins at me, my lady parts start dancing.

*Smartass.*

It's his turn to walk with me. Coffees in hand, we take our conversation from a busy street to the closest alleyway. The space with less bodies rushing around us gives a sense of privacy. There's a park not far but a walk through the park sounds like a date and not a business meeting.

I need to keep my wits when it comes to this guy. He's charming and knows how to use his give-no-shits attitude, and I don't think I want that to change, but he needs to understand I have a lot to lose here, too.

I pointedly wait for him to start the conversation, my silence forcing him to fill the empty air.

"I can't let anyone know I'm The Heartburn," he says, leaning back against the wall, sipping his drink.

*I was right.* It makes me giddy inside knowing his identity. I can't help but wonder if he doesn't know what he means to people.

"Why keep it a secret? Don't you want people to know you? To know your art? You're so talented—"

"I can't let anyone know because I'm also Jett King..."

My smile shatters and my chest tightens. I recognize the name as much as I recognize the artist inside of him.

“You wrecked your brand-new Ferrari on the Manhattan Bridge last month.”

“Lamborghini.” He rocks into me. He’s trying to be cute.

“You don’t need a gallery. You need a publicist or exorcist, something I’m not equipped for. I’m sorry, but I don’t even know if my manager would even have you in the gallery.” I cringe at the back tracking I’ll have to do with Albert. He’ll eat it up and spit it out to my father.

“Coco, please, give me a shot. I want to change. I want to be a better person. I don’t want to be that trainwreck the tabloids expect to crash his sports car.” He steps closer to me, taking my empty hand in his in between us. “I want to find someone and stop the literal head on collision with having no future that I’m on, you know? I really don’t like what I’ve become. I want someone and I want a life. What I have now isn’t that— it’s an act. They think I’m an influencer, but sometimes I wonder if I’m a sinfluencer.”

*Sinfluencer? Never thought of it that way.*

He continues, “Don’t you want someone, too? I mean, unless you have someone?” I swear I hear hope in his voice that I don’t.

I don’t answer, but I’m also not convinced by his story, mainly because it all hits so close to home. Are those all the things he truly wants or could he tell that I want them too? Having a family, the minivan, the real life of settling down are all a part of my dream too.

“I need someone to put me on the straight and narrow. Someone like you. Someone who has her shit together and can see through my bullshit. Who calls me out?” He squeezes my hand and it shoots an unfamiliar zing through my chest. “It can be pretend, but I need it to look real.

*But isn’t that the same as what you’re doing?*

I think of the pros and cons and while there are some definite cons, like my father not liking him—but he doesn’t

like anyone, gaining a reputation that I'm not looking for—that would never happen, I'm a nobody, and having Albert find out the ruse and send me on my way. My father has very little say in that. In our family it's do or die, learn or fail, conquer or be conquered. This could be my moment to take control of my life.

“You'll need to commit to fourteen pieces.” My statement is my agreement to be complicit in his plans.

*We can pull this off and if we do, I'll get that promotion.*

“And all fourteen will be in the exhibit,” he says as his eyebrow rises. “No picking and choosing.” When he thinks I'm about to protest he adds, “Trust me, they'll all be worthy of display.”

Jett squeezes my hand once again and I shiver. He brings to his lips. “Do we have a deal, Coco?”

I want to tell him not to be like that. Don't be smooth. Don't be calm. Because my heart is pounding in my chest. But I just purse my lips and the scarlet heat of a blush rushes through me like wildfire. His confidence is hitting me in all the right places. I let him kiss my knuckles as I nod.

“While this is nice...” I clear my throat trying to reset my internal systems. “A man's word is nothing in this day and age. We need it in writing. Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” He's still holding my hand as I tug hard.

“To get you a contract at Raspberry & Risqué, Mr. King.”

He licks his lips and nods. “I guess that would be the responsible way to handle business. Please, call me Jett, Princess,” he implores, his voice slick and silky.

I shake my hand free. If things get too familiar it will be the opposite of responsible business management. It's not like I even call my boss by his last name.

I need to be cautious around Jett, not Albert.

“Baby steps, *Mr.* King. Baby steps.”

*But why do I feel like I'm taking a huge leap into this man's world and arms?*

## JETT

X MARKS THE SPOT, BUT MY TREASURE IS PINK NOT GOLD. With the contract signed and my future looking more secure than ever, I have reason to celebrate. Fourteen pieces, a high-end gallery, and now all I need is the girl.

I slick back my hair as Albert takes off with the paperwork, not even sparing me a second glance. He does, however, eye Coco more than I like. I don't think he's competition and I try not to think much about it. She is his employee after all.

“Can we talk outside?” I ask.

She's been fidgeting since we got here. Now she's dancing toe-to-toe, as excited as I am about my showcase.

She agrees, leading me through the gallery to the glass double doors up front. We pass mostly paintings, a few sculptures, but rarely anything as radical as what I offer. She explains they are very selective and rarely share photography or anything but paintings, when I ask about the mediums they typically showcase.

Outside she wraps her arms around herself, sporting a white sweater and pink pants today. I'm always curious how she'll sport her signature color each time I see her, and I've never been disappointed by the selections. A beret of plaid black and white sits back on her hair, pinned daintily, showing off petite pink pearls in her ears.

Coco is different from most women I've had in my life, all the way from dating to friends to fans. Perhaps that's why I'm

a little nervous around her. I figure stepping away from her work, and out into the fresh air my nerves would calm—it has not. My tongue feels thick and swollen like I'll need an EpiPen or go into anaphylactic shock before the words will make it out.

“Come to dinner with me?”

She's taken aback, quite literally stepping back from me. “Jett, I don't think that's—”

“Please, Princess. Give this frog a chance.” I take two steps to close the distance between us, taking her hand into mine. I'd get down on my knees, but it might look too much like a proposal and I definitely don't need that to be in the tabloids.

Although today I haven't seen a single camera. I doubt they gave up, but maybe they found another person to torture.

Coco bites her lip, eyes everywhere but me as she considers my pleading.

She's in her head and I can see the wheels turning in her darting eyes. She needs more than begging.

*She needs to the truth.*

“You owe me nothing. You've done so much for me already, but I really need the paparazzi to see me differently—to see me with someone who's...” I pause and words flash behind my eyes.

*Successful. Confident. Strong. Passionate. Not fake or a user.*

“Boring?” she finishes for me with a tip of her head when I take too long.

That definitely isn't the word I'm looking for though.

“No! You're not boring. Who can look at your pink and think boring?” Her hand is soft under my fingers, and I find myself rubbing it just to feel the delicate silkiness. “I was going to say... scatheless.”

“You mean normal?” She huffs at my absurd choice of words and my lips reflect her soft smile.

She’s beautiful through and through.

“I would use ‘normal’ in the best of ways,” I promise her, my heart tapping out a new rhythm I’m not all that familiar with. And I don’t remember when I stopped feeling like this with a woman— if I ever did. My trust has taken a beating as well as my reputation lately. I’m not sure she’s this person, but it’s what I know how to do. “Please, let me wine and dine you, Coco.”

Her lips purse as she considers the request, stepping back and her fingers slipping through mine. Her head cocks as she looks me up and down.

She clears her throat. “Are we talking Raspberry & Risqué upscale?”

I can hear the lilt of agreeance in her voice as she asks me. When I nod, she holds her hand out expectantly.

She says, “Phone. I’ll give you my personal number you can send me the details.” She adds her contact information to my list, tsking at names like Kitten, Demon, EX, and other uncouth names for women in my phone. “And I recommend you reconsider who you interact with if you’re serious about changing, Mr. King.”

“Your wish is my command, Princess.” I trap her wrist when she holds out her hand. “And please, call me Jett.”

I turn and only look back when I’m steps away to see the smile on her face.

“Later, Coco.”

“Later, Jett.”

With every step, I quickly start going down the roster, checking bubbles, and hitting delete until my phone’s contact list is business, family, and a few close friends who I’m not sure are still willing to talk to me. I have a lot of apologizing to do.



I call my doctor and make an appointment for a physical. I've never not used protection with anyone. Never ever. But if I'm going to change my ways, I need to know where I stand right now. The new me takes care of himself, as well as wanting to take care of others.

Lastly, I change her name in my phone from Coco Minden to the crown emoji.

*Now, that's better. She's definitely a queen.*

## COCO

I OWN MORE THAN JUST PINK. AT WORK, I TRY TO UTILIZE THE color as my signature, and it does bleed over into my personal but tonight isn't a pink dress night. Tonight is cocktail... tonight is little black dress. LBD. There is no room between me, and this body hugger and it only makes my pink hair look... *pinkier?*

Since moving out on my own, I don't go to the uptown restaurants like the one Jett insisted on. I can't afford it. Being on my own requires sacrifices. Not until I'm a full-time curator and not just an exhibit manager. I want Albert's job. I eventually want a gallery... my own. Then I can afford this side of town.

My parents' money is theirs. They've been clear about that, and I understand. I struggle living on my own. Ramen is hard to choke down day after day, but I think that's what makes today's achievement all that more special. It's mine. It's something I can call my own. And a little celebration of a long-wanted achievement is warranted. I'll just be judicious about what I spend.

I slide my hands down the sleek reflective velvet, the black having a mystique quality, alternating between black as dark as space and yet bright purples and teals in the creases that catch the light as if the night sky could have waves. An iridescence that is magical. The collar and sleeves are netted with a polka-dot design, spicing up an otherwise edging-on-plain dress. Strappy black heels are simple, but a couple diamond accents sparkle from an anklet, six tiny diamond drop

earrings, and a barrette in my hair. I've elected to keep my hair mostly down, pinned back on one side with the bejeweled clip.

I almost feel like... *a princess*.

My heart is racing as I fuss over minor details like the smoothness of the skirt, or a hair out of place. I can barely find air when the rev of an engine outside my building draws my attention.

*He's here.*

I'm out the door and down the steps before he can come up. I have clothes everywhere inside, like a tornado came through. He does not need to see the mess I can curate.

"Hi Jett, right on time," I commend him. At least I think it's him because the only thing familiar about him is his face.

His usual black garb is replaced with a three-piece pink suit. Yes, my eyes do not deceive me, he's wearing... *pink*. A nice shade at that. The suit fits him like a glove but the white shirt and maroon tie, and the silky pocket square, the whole thing, isn't really him. And I wonder what this makeover is really about. Ulterior motives have been my experience with men and the questions flood me.

*Is he trying to impress me? Someone else? Stand out? Make a statement?*

He stands in front of a black Range Rover. And while still sleek, it's not as flashy and dangerous as a Lamborghini.

"And here I thought we'd be matching." Jett's gaze roams all over me. He's distracted by the sight of me, flowers from behind his back visible as he slackens with shock. He clears his throat and straightens up, properly pulling the bouquet out from behind him. "You look beautiful," he says, extending them to me.

"Jett, you don't have to do or say—"

"I do. And I mean it, you look absolutely stunning." He lets out a sigh and bites his bottom lip, eyeing the hem of my dress where my legs are visible. All that running might've been to get to this moment.

“There isn’t going to be a woman more beautiful out tonight,” he continues, and my cheeks burn.

“Thank you,” I mutter softly, accepting the compliments for now.

He opens the backseat door for me and I crane my neck to notice a driver in the front.

*Right. What playboy drives himself?*

I’m used to my parents being carted around, but it was never great for a family and I always seemed like a little bit of an afterthought. When I was old enough, I sat in the front with the driver. Being far in the back of the SUV was lonely. At least I felt like I fit in up front. We were both just an expectation in my father’s eyes. But Jett seems like he’s really doing everything the same and yet there’s a difference. And there’s definitely room for a family in here. I could imagine him as a dad—carefree, willing to go the distance, and making sure to put a smile on my face whenever I least expect.

My skin tingles and my face burns hot. I’m picturing a family with him, and this isn’t even a real date.

*At least not in my mind.*

The car ride is quiet, but peaceful and absolutely misleading to what awaits us outside when we arrive at the restaurant. Jett should have used the time alone to prepare me for the onslaught of flashes from cameras. My only exposure to such things was for the gallery and the art and artist were the feature— never me!

It’s Jett opening my door, not the driver. His hand slides into mine, his body turning to block me from the flashing lights for a moment.

“Just act natural,” is his advice.

*Right. Easy for you to say... I think.*

“Look at my hair, Jett. Natural doesn’t suit me. A little warning would’ve been nice!” I whisper in his ear sliding out as his arm snakes around my waist, keeping us close.

My heart clips along at a head-spinning pace and it's not the cameras in my face. It's the arm around my waist causing it. Okay, maybe it's both. They're snapping pictures of us, together... very together, very close. I have to be as pink as his suit at this point.

It's probably too late to turn tail and run. I'm not sure if this is something I can do, but before doubt can rear its head any further, Jett's whispering in my ear.

"You got this, Coco. You own this night. Focus on me if it's too much," he speaks with a nurturing tone that eases the tension in every muscle of my body. He's confident and calm. So I decide to follow suit.

And it works. I focus not on him and the feeling of his sinewy arm cupping my waist, supporting me. It isn't overwhelming. It's actually kind of nice. I think of how easily we glide from the car to the entrance before I can begin to second guess myself again. The tick-tick-tick of cameras snapping ceases.

Jett offers me a few words of praise and pushes a pink curl behind my ear. For a moment there isn't a single person in this world other than us. His thumb lingers on my jaw, and I think he's about to kiss me, and oddly enough, I'm waiting for it.

Wanting it.

Finding myself leaning in.

Wishing like I have a Fairy Godmother in my corner to make it happen.

But a bright flash breaks the moment and Jett growls, arm flinching but I grab his wrist quickly, keeping it at my cheek. If he hits the paparazzi there's not much reputation to salvage.

"Focus on me. I'm here for you, too." The words come out naturally and I wonder where they really came from.

His frustration gives way to an easy smile and then a chuckle. "I think that's my line."

I laugh and the cameras go crazy, people yelling, "What did she say?" and "What's so funny, Jett?"

But soon the shouting stops. The inside of the restaurant is protected from the crazy on the outside.

We're settled at a table away from the entrance, finally giving us needed privacy and I think I take my first really soothing breath for minutes. Jett picks a wine for us, and we order before settling in with a burgundy-filled glass and contentment.

It's nice to be alone. Nice and nerve-wracking.

"Have you given the show any thought? Any chance you'll divulge your theme?" I ask, sipping the wine. It's warm and sweet but has a dry finish—in many ways, it reminds me of Jett.

Jett considers his wine first, swirling it and tasting it. "Not yet. I've been preoccupied."

*What could be more important than the show? It's important to me. I hope it's important to him.*

I rattle off a few ideas. "Your free painting is to die for, it might be my favorite. But sculpture is really hot right now and not common in street artists usually. What you did with that toilet paper, papier mâché technique was a clear switch on form and function."

"Not sure if I'll do my usual thing or what everyone else is doing to keep it saleable for the gallery. Maybe I need to get outside of the box, not just step maybe leap!" His grin slackens as he adds. "Plus, I'll have to divulge that I'm The Heartburn."

I hadn't thought of that yet, alter ego meeting alter ego.

*Who is the real Jett King if he wants to change so badly?*

"How are you feeling about that? Like Bruce Wayne?"

He laughs. "I'm not much of a dark knight..."

"Black is your color though," I remind him.

"Not a fan of the pink?" He crumbles forward like I've shot him with a verbal arrow. "You wound me."

“You look nice.” *Like so nice that not wearing panties was a serious mistake.* I shake the thought off to continue. “Don’t get me wrong. But it’s certainly out of the box for you.”

“Thanks. I think the swapping colors has shown me something about you, too. You have an edgy side I didn’t expect.”

I savor my wine with a few more sips as his gaze holds to me, pinning me to the chair. “But really, how are you?”

“A little scared.” The admission makes me freeze and I meet his gaze. “What were you doing out so early that morning?”

“What morning?” I counter.

“The morning you ran me down and stalked me to my home?” His foot brushes my leg under the table and goosebumps join the fray of sensitivity throughout my body. He’s ditched his burgundy loafers, pushing the envelope in this fancy restaurant just like he does with his art.

“I like to be early to work. Plus walking the city at the time is decadent. It’s quiet but not silent, a bustle to it that in its own way is thriving. When I’m early to the gallery, I can take in the new artists or even old ones, and no one is there to put their ideas in my head. I can take it all in as I see it. Think of it as personal studying. I want to recognize a Picasso or a Kahlo from fifty feet away, the strokes, the lines, the colors. The same way I knew who you were from studying your works.”

“Two of my favorites,” Jett remarks with a toast of his wine.

“Mhm. I knew you had good taste. Mine, too.”

His foot slides past my calf and I bite my lip, doing my best not to squirm at the electricity his touch fills me with.

We’re quiet again when the food comes. The food is a perfect balance of a feast for the stomach and eyes. Beauty on a plate and soothing to the hangry beast inside of me who couldn’t eat because of frantically looking for the right dress. The company is just as pleasant. It’s nice to enjoy a meal with

someone, no forced conversation, just shared smiles and glances... and a foot persistently grazing my skin.

But this could all be fleeting— just an act, I remind myself. He says he wants to change but it will take action and time. Any moment he could slip back into the careless playboy in need of a power trip and that permanent spotlight. I have dreams that don't include a flashing lights.

There's no place for me in a life like that.



## JETT

LEAVING THE RESTAURANTS WASN'T AS BAD AS ARRIVING. A little wine to loosen us up, Coco didn't even pay the shouts and flashes any mind, and for once, I barely noticed them too. It's been a long time since I felt this relaxed, this content with someone else.

When we get back to Coco's, I repeat the gentleman's motions, opening her door and leading her out. This is where everything should end. She goes back inside, and we had a respectable date. But part of me doesn't want to end the night here on the steps.

It's because there could be more photographers, taking the chance of filming her address, I lie to myself.

It's because I want to keep spending time with Coco. I enjoy her company like I used to enjoy the high of driving fast and living dangerously. I wanted to change. I just didn't know I want to change for her.

At her door, she turns and pauses, stopping me in my tracks. I lean in close, fingers skimming her hip lightly. The velvet is tactile and soft, but I can't help but think how much better her skin would feel under my hand.

Coco glances around past me, swallowing. The electricity between us has been palpable all night, it only ever eased—or perhaps heightened—when we touched. I craved those brushes of our bodies more than the food in front of me. She's practically edible in my mind.

*I wonder how sweet she'll taste.*

“Think we can make a goodnight kiss look good?” I ask her, lips nearly to hers.

Coco sucks in a deep breath, her chest hitching as she holds it in. Is she nervous? It’s just a kiss even if I want it to be so much more... A kiss can lead to so much more.

“I’ve never kissed anyone,” her admission is barely audible.

“What?” I freeze. Our eyes meet and my gut tightens with indecision. How is it a woman like Coco has never been kissed? She should be smothered daily in them. Who’s depriving her of joy?

She huffs. “I said—”

“I heard you. But how is that possible?”

Coco’s smile is shy, her shoulders raising and falling slowly, making her dress show off her toned décolleté. The move makes my stomach flip. I don’t want an explanation. I want to right the wrong.

“No one has ever made me want to be kissed. I mean I *want* a kiss, I bet it’s lovely,” she sighs. “But it’s never felt right.”

“Does it feel right now?”

Her answer is hesitant, but I don’t think it’s from doubt. Maybe nerves.

She breathes out. “Kiss me.”

I take it slow. I don’t start with her lips, that’s the main course. My lips brush her forehead, then each cheek, the tip of her nose, and lastly when she can barely so much as breathe—I claim her lips. The two peaks are soft and trembling. Her whole-body trembles like she’s experiencing some internal tectonic shift.

I cup her face to still her, to support her, absorb the aftershocks. She’s given me her first kiss and I won’t waste it even if I feel a little less like a prince and definitely more like a fraud.

She makes the sweetest of noises, a little sighing moan, a kitten cry, and I need more. I deepen the kiss, slipping my tongue across her lips like knocking before entering. She tastes of the dessert we shared, a caramel-cocoa treat.

I have to stop myself because if I don't now, there's no stopping at all. You can't taste a woman like Coco and stop so easily. It takes every fiber of my being to break from her, like two locked magnets. My forehead presses into hers, sharing out labored breaths once our lips finally untangle.

"Want to come inside?" Coco asks me and my heart and dick have a civil war for a split second.

"I shouldn't," I answer quickly before I can overthink the matter.

"Oh." Her dejection is as painful as a blow to my stomach.

"Not that I don't want to," I reassure her, stilling holding her face.

Maybe just another kiss at least.

I kiss her again, longer, harder, desperate to survive a day or two without her presence if I can just have one more taste. She whimpers her delight at the sudden intimacy. I break us apart quickly, stepping back or else I will come inside.

"Believe me, I want nothing more than to come inside. But if that was your first kiss, I imagine there are a lot of other firsts too. I don't want to rush that, or rush anything with you."

Because it's the right thing to do, I am trying to change from the bad boy that wouldn't hesitate to come inside and find our way to her bedroom, to the man Coco deserves, a man she can rely on for more than just a one-night stand.

I want her today. I'll want her tomorrow... and the next day.

"I want to take this slow," I say softly, taking her hands into mine.

"Okay," her smile peaks out a little as I kiss her fingers.

"Call me?" I ask hopefully.

“For the art show or because you want me to?”

“I want to hear your sweet voice.”

“What if I’m a texter?” She grins, leaning back against her door.

“I’ll be happy for any time of day you give me. Goodnight, Coco.”

Taking one last look before I get in the car, I see her waiting, watching me in the low light of the streetlamp. Her dark dress is like the night, and her eyes are stars and that hair, definitely the moon. I’m struck with inspiration and need to get home immediately to get this down on canvas.

The doorman is inside at this time of night, but that doesn’t mean the doors aren’t occupied.

I don’t live that far away, and what I find outside is a tall slender woman, sleek and pointed in all her features, beautiful in her own right... but her attitude is what fills my throat with bile as I approach.

“Celeste, what are you doing here?” I say, knowing I can’t just slip past her.

She dramatically pouts, clutching her fur shawl to her chest. Her hard-edged bob doesn’t move an inch as she spins to face me. Cold, calculating jade-colored eyes peer up at me.

“I came to party! I need a good time after this week and all I could think of was Jett King the man with cars to race and ruin.” She giggles but I’m not amused.

“My license is suspended. You’ll have to find a joyride elsewhere. Goodnight.” I try to end it there, using my fob to unlock the door. She catches my elbow, spinning me from the doors and into her arms.

Her arms snake under my jacket and I wrap my arms around her to keep from falling.

“You can ride me then,” she purrs, one of her hands massaging my lower back.

I grunt, my skin crawling on my body as I wriggle free of her grasp.

“No,” I say the word so loudly that they have to heard it inside. “I said good night.” I brush myself off and freeze at the chilling stare she offers me, accepting rejection not her forte.

“Fine! Be a sourpuss tonight. I’ll be back when you’re in a better mood.” She plants a kiss on my cheek before I can stop her but at least she’s gone.

By the time I reach my door my mood doesn’t improve. I search my pockets and scowl. My keys are missing. Maybe I should’ve stayed with Coco, we didn’t have to do anything... I doubted I had the discipline to be that good of a boy.

The doorman checks my ID as he claims I don’t look like the Jett he knows. It’s meant to be funny, but this is not funny. He helps me with the spare key to get in but now I need to buy a replacement. I could make Coco a spare key too...

## COCO

CAN TIME JUST STOP? I HAVE TREPIDATION THAT WHEN THE gallery showcase begins, time will move faster than it already has. Two weeks. It's been two weeks of sweet phone calls, spontaneous dates, and more paparazzi. But to be honest, I hardly notice the cameras anymore. Why would I notice them when I have Jett King dotting on me?

He's taken time from his art to bring me lunches and find ways to make my life easier. Even taking to joining me for runs and struggling to keep up with me. I slowed a little for him, but he wouldn't have it. He said that the view from behind me was worth being left in the dust by a girl.

But I like having him by my side. I feel like something I've been missing is there. I feel like the day is complete when I see him. And I feel completely head over heels for a man and I don't know if he's acting or being completely honest. He's a great actor if he is, and if he isn't, I wonder if he's wanting more of me, like I'm wanting more of him.

I don't know what's going to happen when the showcase is over, but I can only hope it doesn't mean my time with Jett will be over with it. He wanted help with his reputation, and I wanted his artwork, it was completely tit for tat. But the time we've had together is so much more than work and esteem. My heart and head have given into each other, and I'm smitten.

*Actually, I'm in deep, deep smit when it comes to Jett King.*

Jett works around the dedicated section for his display at the gallery while I watch from the loft above. While he's been trying to wear less black, he can't stop when he's working. I've encouraged different looks, but I've found there isn't anything wrong with the way he dresses, or the way he looks, I quite like it and who and what says he has to change his look. I have my pink. He can have his black. All that matters is his character, his true changes, not the superficial layer.

Albert thwacks a newspaper into my arm, making his presence known. I straighten up, smoothing out my dress and taking my eyes off Jett for the first time in an hour.

"Do we have a problem, Ms. Minden?" he pointedly asks me, his eyes as sharp as his words. The poised question reminds me all too well of my father whenever I had a slip of a grade below one hundred. He still demands nothing less than perfection.

"A problem?" I ask, shaking off the flashbacks of a stricter childhood. "No problems, why do you ask?" I amend my response.

"You've been ogling Mr. King the entire time he's been working."

Guess I haven't really been hiding it all that well.

"Are you and Mr. King screwing?"

Strike me with lightning. The question has me stammering inside of my head the words tumbling over each other on their way out. "N...n...no... no, we're not!"

By his crossed arm, lips curling into a sneer, I don't think I've been convincing. "*Miss Minden*, need I remind you of the reputation the Raspberry & Risqué has and what we expect of our employees? Mr. King's past publicity isn't exactly what we are trying to promote here. Only his artistic prowess. You may need to reexamine your personal attractions."

With his British accent it sounds like a bad rewrite of *Pride & Prejudice*.

I stand my ground. "He isn't like that anymore. His future is all we should be focusing on. He's an astounding artist and

he's changing himself for the better."

"Is he now? Are those the pretty lies he's been telling you?" Albert ceremoniously holds out the newspaper. Smugness coats me. The entertainment section sorted to be seen first.

On the front page, it's Jett outside his building, a woman with her arms wrapped around him. The outfit is imprinted into my memory. The pink suit he wore when we shared my first kiss. My mouth goes as I try to reason with myself that the past two weeks can't have been a lie. Jett is more than words, he's actions. He's shown me all the change he can be.

"These are old." I'm trying to convince both of us. "They could be from any time. The press loves keeping images to publish any old time. It creates drama when things are going well for celebrities." *Yes, that has to be it. I trust him. He's not this guy.*

"Coco," Albert startles me with my own name. "He is drama. He is trouble. Capital T, trouble."

Albert is so close. My back presses into the railing, his hands braced on either side of me. He's much too close. Has he been cornering me this entire time?

I duck out from between his arms, needing air and space or — I look to the floor.

Albert grabs my arm, reeling me back to him. I slam into his chest and lose my breath for a moment. His face is next to mine, gripping my wrist and arm on my lower back now.

"You wouldn't want to hurt your reputation much less your family's would you, Coco? Your father would be so terribly disappointed in you... I would be disappointed, and we both have a lot to lose with giving Mr. King a chance. Being around Mr. King will put your honor into question and I'm afraid we will have a problem if you two continue to grow— close."

"Let go of me," I hiss when I manage to find my voice. I squirm and his hold only tightens on my wrist.

Too preoccupied Albert doesn't notice King's ascent to the loft. "Coco, I need another platform." His boots stop cracking



against the metal stairs. “What the hell? What’s going on here?”

I look to him, my heart pounding.

Albert hesitates, squeezing me against his body as if he’s trying to decide whether to kiss me with a witness or not. I tug my arm free, and he steps back, forced to explain the situation.

“None of your business, chap. Miss Minden and I were discussing details for your exhibit.” Albert smooths back his hair, smirking.

Jett chews up the bullshit and spits it back out. “Looked more like you were making Coco uncomfortable.”

I quickly move across towards Jett, putting space between Albert and me. I’m shaking and my insides are twisting. Albert’s taken this too far. Both the touching and what he said about Jett and the paper... it’s all sending me reeling.

“You’re one to talk. You’ve had your hands all over her the moment you could, you scoundrel. If I’d known that Jett King was The Heartburn, I would never have allowed this. You should have never stepped foot in *my* gallery.”

*It’s not yours. It’s mine.*

Jett’s whole body stiffens before he’s bolting towards Albert. I panic and step in between, holding my arms out and closing my eyes tightly. It isn’t to protect Albert. It’s for the man I think deserves a second chance.

“Jett, don’t! He’s not worth it!” I shout desperately.

Jett doesn’t plow through me like a linebacker. He stops just short of me, arms slack at his side but his fists clench with white knuckles. He might not have finished his charge, but his fists are loaded, ready to throw a punch.

“Please, think about all you’ve been working towards. Is this really who you want to be?” He isn’t looking at me, staring past me at Albert.

I can hear the smirk behind me as Albert snickers out loud. “A leopard doesn’t change its spots, Coco.” I want him to go

back to using my surname. My name on his tongue is like an acrid lollipop.

Jett huffs, shaking his head. He continues to avoid looking at me as he leaves. “Forget this. I’m out of here.” His last words are a harsh whisper. “Not worth it.”

Albert laughs louder. “See! He can’t even stand a little pressure. He has the will of a toddler.”

Jett’s at the front door by the time I catch up to him.

“Please, take a minute to think about this. Where are you going? You wanted to change. You told me you wanted to be different. This is your opportunity. Don’t throw it away, Jett.”

His back remains to me, a hand on the door. “Why do you believe in me?”

I spin him around to face me. “Because you’re worth believing in!”

His eyes widen, finally registering why I’m there since he stumbled upon Albert and me upstairs. His touch is so much different than Albert’s. It’s wanted. Warm. Possessively sweet, protecting me and my heart. And right now he’s afraid. And I’m afraid.

We’re both afraid of the same thing and it’s not Albert. It’s losing each other.

Jett kisses me and our lips mold together like sculptures crafted by Michelangelo. Any fears in his eyes melt away.

“When are you done with work?” His eyes flicker towards the stairs behind me, looking for signs of my boss.

“I’ve been off,” I say. “Have been for over an hour. I just like watching you work.”

He smiles and rubs my cheek. “Come home with me?”

*Thought you’d never ask.*

## COCO

AT MY HOME, I'M SPRUCING UP. I'M NERVOUS, CAN YOU blame me? I'm not expecting anything to happen. Jett talked about taking things slow. I should want things slow too. It would be my first time if I let things happen.

But my mind is wandering to other places than the bedroom like the newspaper. I stop packing my bag and pick up the newspaper that I held on to for some reason. There in detailed color is the picture, a little fuzzy with the print pixelation but unmistakable Jett in a pink suit.

The woman is tall and willowy, her arms tucked under his jacket. It's intimate. Her body molds to his with familiarity. But he looks odd, almost stiff. My nerves become frayed, and I consider canceling. A quick text, something to push it off until I can think about it. I need to talk to him about it.

Maybe he has an explanation.

Maybe it's old... or maybe it's the drama that comes with Jett King?

His ears must have been burning. My phone lights up with a text from him.

**Jett: You don't have allergies, right? I'm making dinner.**

He's cooking me dinner. He's shown me he can change, and he can be good to me. So there's no way this picture is an accurate portrayal of him anymore. It's the past. We all have one and I'm trying to fight mine as much as he's fighting his.

I've kept myself in this bubble of perfection, protection, and... well, pink.

I grab the paper and throw it in the bin so hard that the tin rattles and tips over. I've been a well of emotions today between Albert and Jett.

I don't want to think about my boss.

I text back and smile to myself. I can be smart about this. If I leave it all out in the air, then I leave room for error. Be smart. Ask questions. They tell you to do that in school and at work, it can be the same with relationships, right?

The prickle of my father's voice creeps in. *I had high hopes for you. I thought I'd have a boy to take over the empire. I need to see nothing less than perfection and passion for me to give this to you.*

I'm tired of trying to please him. My father isn't an expert on love and relationship though. His voice doesn't matter here. Only mine does.



In all honesty, I didn't expect the street artist to have a modern apartment. The building had appeared classic and old, with brick features and antique accents but all the rooms must have been remodeled to appeal to the rich and famous.

None of his own artwork is on display. A guest room has been altered into an art studio and storage supply of mediums for him to work with. Instead what colorful art is on display are artists I've never heard of or if I have, it's from small local shows. It impresses me that he supports others' passions, all while remaining in the shadows of his own.

Over dinner, we discuss his fourteen pieces and opening night. The food is delicious. I didn't know he was such a good cook. The chicken parmesan has crunch while the meat still holds moisture. Simple, yet full of flavor. *And heart.*

As we sip wine, he gives me a proper tour. It's as if his own home is a gallery, stopping at each piece of artwork to

give details about the piece and the artist.

“I had no idea you were so patient about the local art community,” I comment with a small smile.

Jett’s cheeks warm, a touch of color at the top of his closely trimmed beard. “Artists great and small should all be appreciated. To have the passion and bravery to put yourself out there. It’s admirable.”

“I agree, and I admire you, Jett.”

“Thanks, Princess.” He’s calmer than ever and it makes butterflies take flight in my stomach. This vulnerability has to be met with my own.

I continue, “I’ve never been an artist, but I’ve always liked the way art makes me feel. I was in school with an intent of becoming a lawyer, like my father. He bought the gallery right before I started college and I tried to fight my pull to it, but I was there every weekend. Then one of my electives was Art History, they made us go to other museums and galleries and I fell in love. Every time I went, I became emotional, like something broke in me but there was nothing in me that needed fixing. Art holds my heart.”

Jett’s fingers slide between mine as he holds me hand. He must have realized it before I do that tears have slipped down my cheeks. I clear my throat and use the back of my hand to wipe them away.

“Wow. I don’t know what came over me. Changing from law to art was hard. As much as he appreciates art, my father didn’t... and still doesn’t... approve.”

“I didn’t know my father,” Jett admits and I’m not quite sure what that tells me about him, but I can hear some pain in his voice.

We both stare at the bright red painting in front of us. It’s telling either a tale of passion or rage depending on your perspective.

He clears his throat and there’s a long pause, “My mom worked three jobs to support us. I didn’t appreciate her back then. I was just some shitty punk. I thought I was better

because I was artistic and didn't care about money. I was so naive. I wish I could've shown her the respect she deserved. I love her, I hope she knows that at least."

"Do you ever visit her?" I ask.

"I should. She's just over the state line. Would you come with me?"

I smile and lean against him, resting my head on his shoulder. "I would love to show her the man you've become."

"I have you to thank for being someone she might be proud of."

The words tumble out. "I like you, Jett."

"I love you, Coco."

*Jett King, the drama, has to one-up me.*

He turns to face me and the air thickens. His hand lifts my chin, not because I was looking down, but so he can look in my eyes.

"What do you want, Princess? Tell me and I'll give it to you."

I want this. I want him to show me what love is. I know how to please myself, but I want him to know how to pleasure me.

"I want you," I whisper.

His hand slips into mine and walking backward he pulls me toward a door off the living room. "You are in charge. You say what, when, how..."

"Sex, now, and with you..."

He smiles. "We can do that."

His bedroom is a king-sized bed. Fitting. It's decked out in luxury sheets. For a man who smelled of cigarettes and yesterday's coffee when I met him, I'm impressed with how organized the room is. It's got a rhyme and reason for everything, sparsely decorated, only for function, not for style or excess.

As an influencer, he's been earning money by lending his name and his bad boy persona to sponsors, showing up at events, trying their products, putting them in front of his audience. That's how it works, but originally, it was a weird thing to me that they wanted his thumbs up. He was known for being ostentatious and like he didn't care. But now that I know him, I know that he'd never put his name behind something he didn't actually love and believe in. He's authentic, and he does care, even if he played a complicated part in the influencer-based world that seemed like he didn't.

I walk the room, kicking off my Converse shoes as I meander. The wall of windows makes my stomach do a rollercoaster ride. It's a beautiful view of the city, but...

"Ummm... you know, I don't know about..." I point. I'm not really one to be on display.

He lifts a remote and the windows fog to an opaque white.

"Oh, that's better."

Jett chuckles lightly while shoving his hands in his jeans' pockets. His eyes search the room. "I don't like clutter. It makes me nervous."

"Your place is really nice. Mine is..."

His long strides get him to me before I can finish. "I'm sure it's perfect, like you."

"It's mine and that's what's important."

His arms wrap around me, and I lean into him, my head resting right below his chin. "You're important to me, Coco. More important than anything I've ever wanted or had."

I crane my neck to look up at him. His strong jawline and his piercing eyes look like he's been carved from stone. "This feels like it's a fairy tale, but I wonder if it's a dream, or it's going to all unravel at midnight, my prince."

He looks "It's no fairy tale, it's real. I just hope I'm not turning back into a frog."

I chuckle. "You were never a frog, Jett. You just were swimming in the wrong pond. Now you have your feet firmly

on the ground. You're out of the dingy water and into fresh air. You thought you had to be someone else, when really the person you are is who I..." I swallow hard, "It's who I love."

"You have a way with words."

"And you have a way with my heart."

His lips claim mine and I melt into the move. He's the one I've been waiting for. He might not be perfect, but he's mine and that's all that matters.

The next moments stand in time. I'm not nervous. I'm in the moment. I'm finding my way, too. I don't need to fill anyone's expectations. Just mine.

And I expect this to be a night to remember.

His hands slip my cardigan down my shoulders, revealing the skinny straps of my pink camisole. Fingertips dance along my skin, taking their time to explore every inch while our tongues tangle slowly, tumbling against each other, finding a rhythm that's only ours.

My hands find the edge of his t-shirt and I lift. He separates from me and finishes pulling the shirt off. Stepping back, I examine his landscape. Perfect, tight moguls of human muscle bump down his abs and I ski my fingers through and over the peaks and falls. His stomach tenses tight and a small moan hits my ears when I get to the waistband on his jeans.

I unbuckle his belt and slide it out in one strong pull, smiling at how his body is at my will. The bulge that's there is a little intimidating, but I'm up for a challenge. His jeans slip over his hips and down. I cup the front of his boxer briefs and he sucks in a quick breath.

I still. "Are you clean?"

He matches my pause. "Tested right after we met."

"Really?"

"I knew you were special, Princess and from the beginning I wanted to make sure you were protected and felt safe."

"I'm a queen," I state firmly.



His smile widens. “Definitely a queen.”

His hands lift my cami over my head and I slip my jeans down my legs. Standing in only my bra and panties in front of a man who has made me believe that I could have it all, I’m exhilarated.

“You’re gorgeous, Coco.”

“Not so bad yourself, Jett.”

His hand slips into mine and he leads me to the bed.

This is it. I’m putting away my past and forging a future with this man.

*My life makeover.*

---

## **Jett**

My life wasn’t mine before this woman. She’s shown me compassion and a healthy way to live. Being bad isn’t necessarily the end of the world, it’s being better that is the start of something special. I’ll never claim to be perfect, but in her eyes, I see that she believes in me and that’s what I really need.

I pull back the covers. I’ve been keeping my place clean and tidy lately. I hoped this day would come. I’m not going to lie— I’ve wanted her from day one. Maybe now in a different way than the physical attraction and just plain animal need I had back then, but I’ve wanted her and wanted her bad.

She leans over to climb under the covers, and I flick the clasp on her bra, watching it fall to the bed and her beautiful breasts hanging free. She’s stacked and my cock pulses at the sight.

“Beautiful,” I groan.

She looks back, and the innocence I used to see in her is gone. She slips her panties over one ass cheek and then the

other, her dewy lips full and pink already able to be seen from the back. They fall to the floor, and I about fall there myself.

I will worship this woman until the day I die.

I grab her hips as she's in a cat-like position. "Stay here."

She looks back. "Why?"

I drop to my knees and slide my tongue from her clit through her dripping slit.

"Oh, fuck!" Her hands scrunch the bedding into fists.

So sensitive.

I do it again.

"Jett... oh, God."

*Yes, I'm here, baby.*

And again.

Her body shakes and she falls to her elbows.

And again, but this time, I go back to her clit quickly and suckle softly. I need to know what she needs. She bucks a little and I worry I'm going too fast.

"Talk to me, baby. Tell me what feels good."

"Suck there again, Jett. Please..." Her breathy words are magic.

I does as my queen asks. Suckling on that tiny bundle of nerves, while she start to pant, I flip over so I'm on my back. I slicken my fingers with her juices and slide one finger in front of her. She may never have had a man's cock inside of her, but I can tell she's pleased herself with something in the past as she blossoms inside to accept one and then two fingers. I drive them as I suck harder.

"Oh, fuck!" Her body goes into beautiful tremors, her peak hitting her hard. I continue the combined efforts until she's giggling and pushing my head away. I give one last slip of my tongue along the entire area as I slide out from underneath of her.

“I’d say someone’s used something to pleasure herself before?” I say, licking my lips.

She flips over and the blush that covers her body makes me envision a painting of all colors of pink. She is my muse.

“A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.”

“Dildo?” I ask, slipping my boxer briefs down my legs and her eyes widen.

“Yes, but nothing like that!” She nods her head.

My eight hefty inches pulses as I rock my hand along the length. “You still want this?”

She reaches out and replaces my hand with hers. “More than ever.” Pulling me forward, she guides my body toward hers. I balance my body while she rocks her hand.

“Shit, condom...” I almost forgot.

She looks up. “You’re clean. I’m covered.”

“Definitely my queen,” I say before kissing her hard.

She lays back, her head cushioned on a firm pillow. “I’m ready for you, my king.”

Guiding my body onto hers, I line up, seating just inside of what’s warm, slick, and still sensitive. Her eyes roll back as she moans softly.

“I love you, Coco.”

“Love you, Jett.”

I tense as I push forward. I don’t want to hurt this woman. I don’t want to cause her any pain. She’s given me so much pleasure and hope. But my cock slides in with a little effort.

“Yes!” she calls out, her head rocking side to side, and my body instantly calms. She’s here for this. Her legs wrap my waist.

I plant deep inside of her.

The moment is colorful and full of life. And man, it’s fucking intense. So warm, and so slick, and so... damn tight.

“Fuck...” I growl the word and she clasps my face.

“You okay?”

I settle and look into those blue eyes. “This is amazing. I’ve never ever felt like this.”

Her eyes gloss.

I freeze and push up. “Hey, hey, if it hurts or it’s too much we can—”

“No, it’s beautiful. I’m seeing colors I’ve never seen before. My life is bright and so full. And my body responds to you, Jett. I’m tingling everywhere. And I want you to move!”

I mumble a curse, my cock pulsing at the news. “I got you, Coco.”

My drives are long and deep, but slow and steady, too. Soon she’s raising her hips to meet me and her fingernails are digging into the back of my neck.

I lower my head and suckle at the tip of her nipple.

Her moans double and I pick up the pace, faster with my hips and teasing the rosy peak with my teeth.

“Jesus! Oh, fuck, Jett. I’m coming!” Her pussy clamps down on my cock and she holds me deep inside of her while the pulsing flutters over my cock.

I wait for her to calm and then I start back up. She pants and her flushed face is angelic.

“I’m close, babe.”

She lifts her head and her lips crash to mine. And that’s all I can take.

This woman has brought me out of a fugue and into the brightness. Her colorfulness fills a part of me that’s never been filled.

I plant deep and my cock fills her with my seed. Something I can imagine happening again and again and eventually leading to creating another life. Half her, half me, that would be a force to recon with.

I stare into those hypnotizing eyes and find my future.

## JETT

SOMETHING WAKES ME. I ROLL OVER FROM THE WARMTH OF Coco's naked body to stare at the neon lettering of my clock. It's almost midnight.

There's a creak. And another one. The sound of my floorboards in the living room, and the clicking of boots is getting closer. The sounds of someone coming into my apartment must have woken me.

*Shit.*

I slip out of bed without a noise, grabbing a crowbar from under my bedframe. I have to protect Coco. I would... and will... die for her.

With the crowbar held high above my head, ready to be swung down on the intruder, I round the corner. The lights flicker and Celeste steps into view. I don't drop the crowbar, but adrenaline dies down and I lower it slowly.

"What the fuck?!" I shout-whisper at her.

"Baby!" she coos, prancing across the living room towards me. She latches on as she did before. "I told you I'd be back!"

I cringe and push on her, but her lips have already found my neck. Her lipstick smears against my skin and I'm forced to give her a shove to get her to disengage her octopus like arms.

"Celeste, what... How are you in here?" I wipe at my neck and frown at the red that comes away. I can't imagine my door guy letting her in. That's for sure.

Her eyes dart behind me. Coco's soft feet pad on the wood floor. I find her sleepy-eyed, roused by the noise. She's wearing my T-shirt and nothing else. It covers the major bits, but I'm sure this isn't what she expected. Why should she assume there'd be company in the middle of night? The tense bite of anger at someone getting to see her in such a manner hits me like ice water. It should be a view only for me and even worse, I know Celeste will not go down without a fight.

"What's going on?" Coco rubs the sleep from her eyes to focus her gaze on Celeste. "Who is she?"

Celeste butts in, smirking as she re-attaches herself to me. If she were a dog, she'd be humping my leg. "I'm his girlfriend, sweetheart."

My heart hammers in my chest. "The fuck you are," I snap, once more shoving her off of me.

Coco wrings the hem of the shirt in her hands, tugging it down and using it to alleviate the stress building in her. "Then who is she, Jett?" Her eyes are on my neck, smeared with lipstick.

Celeste is adamant, waving a key in our faces. "If I weren't his girlfriend then why would I have a spare? Do you have one of these, Barbie?"

Coco turns tail and runs back to the bedroom while Celeste laughs in victory. "Yes, little pink mouse, scurry on home!"

I round on Celeste, tossing the crowbar aside. "You have five seconds to get the fuck out of my home."

"Baby, don't be like that. When she leaves, I can satisfy you. Or we can start now, give her something to remember you by."

The keys still dangle from her fingers. I jump forward, snatching them from her. "Get out. Now. I won't have you ruin this. I'm different and I'm with Coco!"

It's a struggle with whines and her pawing hands but I eventually get her out the door, slamming it shut behind her and locking it. I text the front door guy and in seconds I hear

the elevator and he's guiding her out. He and I will talk later about who is and isn't allowed inside.

Now for my real princess.

---

## **Coco**

The papers weren't old. That was the same woman. Is Albert right? Is Jett going to burn everything we've built to the ground? Hasn't he changed?

There's some shouting and a door slamming but I ignore it. It's hard to dress when you're crying. Everything is blurred right now— my eyes, my night, my world.

*Stupid tears.* I sniffle. I tug on my pants at the very least, forgetting I'm still wearing his shirt as I exit the bedroom to escape.

But Jett is there, waiting, braced to catch me if I try to pass him. He won't keep me captive, but I'm not sure I want to hear what he has to say.

"I'm sorry, Coco," he says quickly, searching my face for any concerns he can address. "Princess, don't cry. Please. She's gone."

"She's gone... *for now?*" I gasp, trying to hold back the wave of emotions behind my eyes. I fell hard for the bad boy and didn't see his past coming to hit me, too. I thought we were going to live happily ever after. I wanted that.

*I still do.*

And that thought makes me plant my feet. I'm going to hear him out. I'm going to live my life, with or without him, I'm still okay. I roll my shoulders back and he swallows.

"No. She's gone for good. She swiped my key from me the last time I saw her."

My mind flickers to the newspaper picture. The woman's arms are inside his jacket and Jett just standing there...



*It could be true.*

*How do I know for sure?*

“I’m worried, Jett. You have so much baggage and it’s not lost baggage. It shows up when you’ve move on to some new baggage— me.”

His jaw ticks, but then he softens. He knows that’s not going to work with me. My father is hard. He can’t go hard; he has to go soft.

“You’re *not* baggage. You’re the reason I’ve changed, but life isn’t exactly an airport, Coco. We all have baggage.” He takes timid steps towards me, taking me dropping my bag as a good sign.

My tears start to stall. “How do I know that more women won’t just pop in whenever they want? How many more are there?”

“You don’t and can’t. Hell, I don’t know, and I can’t promise you that there won’t be more. You can only trust me that I’m going to send them away. Coco, you have my heart. You’re it. Whatever may come, you’re the last one. The only one. You are my muse. My life thrives with color, mainly pink, but I’ve grown *very* fond of it.”

“Okay, King, you’ve made your case,” I admit as a smile pulls at my lips. Believing him isn’t taking a chance. It’s finding a future.

“Ah yes, the lawyer drop-out would know. Is the court satisfied, your honor?”

I hum softly and unbutton my pants, wiggling out of them. His fingers curl up around the shirt I’m wearing, closing the gap between us.

“I sentence you to...” I laugh before I can finish the lame pun.

“I know just how to serve my time,” Jett finishes for me, dropping to his knees and kissing the glimpse of belly from my undone pants.

“Oh boy,” I whisper, closing my eyes as his warm lips trail across my skin.

“A work of art,” Jett purrs. “My work of art.”

# EPILOGUE

TWO DAYS LATER...

## Coco

Raspberry & Risqué is bustling. It's opening night and we just announced to social media that The Heartburn will be revealed.

My heart beats fast. I want this to be the night where he comes full circle. He wants to leave The Heartburn behind.

"Ms. Minden," Albert's voice makes my spine crawl.

I ignore him while I put the final pricing tag on an acrylic painting that's inspired by... me. It's every shade of pink layered because he says I have layers, too.

"Ms. Minden!" he says forcefully.

I've been avoiding him today, but I spin to face him and straighten my back. In these four-inch heels, we're face to face. "Yes, Albert." I've decided to call him by his first name, respect sailed long ago with this one.

"We've started a line outside and the street is filling with people. This is amazing. I have to admit that I didn't believe that this was a good idea, but... I was wrong."

"Yes, you were," I say, but someone says it with me. I spin to find my father there.

"Dad... um, I didn't think you were coming tonight." I really didn't and now I'm sandwiched between two men who have both made me feel less than. But I look across the room and my gaze holds on someone who makes me feel like so much more than ever.

“I was invited by...” he looks across the room, too. “Your boyfriend?” he asks with peaked brow.

“Yes, Jett King is my boyfriend,” I say the truth firmly and my head spins. I wonder if I’ll pass out. I’m waiting for the knockdown from him.

“And Mr. King also invited me to see something.”

“His works?” I ask.

“No, security footage from two days ago.”

Jett stands behind my father. “I thought he should know what you’ve been putting up with.”

Albert steps forward. “Mr. Minden, I don’t know what you saw, but this punk started—”

“Stop!” My father’s voice makes both Jett and I jump. “I’m sorry, Coco. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I swallow. He’s never apologized for anything. It’s a start.

“Honey, I’m sorry for what you had to go through. I thought Albert was a good person with the right qualifications, but now I see that what’s good on paper isn’t always good in person.” He looks to Albert. “You’re fired. You’ll grab your things, and you’ll leave right now.”

Albert opens his mouth, but clamps it closed, sneering my way. As he passes, he grunts out, “Ungrateful little hussy!”

Jett moves fast and Albert’s arm is behind his back. “Mr. Minden, do I have permission?”

“Do it.”

And I watch as Albert’s kicked out, literally falling on his ass outside the door. The cameras all flash as Jett stands in the doorway, the double doors opened wide. “Welcome everyone to my gallery showing. I’d like to give a big shout out to my girlfriend and gallery curator and manager, Coco Minden. I am Jett King, and I was the Heartburn, but I’m now just me.”

I couldn’t be prouder of him. But I’m not the gallery curator or manager, he was being goofy.

People file in and my father touches my arm.  
“Congratulations.”

“On what?”

“Being promoted.”

“I get to run my own section now?”

“No, honey, you’re going to run Raspberry & Risqué.”

I swear my legs drain of blood. Everywhere tingles.  
“What?”

“It’s yours. It was always meant to be yours. I should’ve believed in you from the beginning. You were never meant to be in law. This is your home.”

“I love Jett, Dad.” I want to come clean. This is my time to be honest. “He’s my real future.”

His arms wrap me up. “I know. And man that young man is head over heels for you. And...” he looks around, “he’s got talent. Maybe he could be your right-hand man here?”

My heart soars. To run Raspberry & Risqué with him would be another happily ever after. “If he wants to, I’d love that.”

“Okay, you’ve got people lining up to purchase, you’re on.” He nods toward the front desk where Albert always sat to be the last one that the patrons would go through, so he got the credit. The normal front desk person, Lola, is checking people out right now. “I think I’m going to mingle and let Lola handle it. I don’t need the credit.”

“Good to hear.” He backs away. “Your mother and I are going to look around and hopefully, if there’s anything left, choose something to go in the permanent gallery.”

“I think maybe we can commission something special, if you don’t.”

“Look at you, already upselling.” He gives me a hug and kisses my forehead. “I’ll be better, sweetheart.”

*A father makeover has happened, too.*

“What’s that smile for?” the voice makes me smile wider.

“You.” I wrap my arms around him, and we melt together.  
“Looks like *The Heartburn* is a hit.”

“I think maybe I’m going to change my art persona, too.”

“Oh, yeah, to?”

“Just ‘The Heart’.”

“Because.”

“My heart doesn’t burn for anything anymore. I don’t burn for love or approval or change. I’m content and my heart is full.”

“Wow. Maybe you should do some poetry, too.”

“Maybe.” His lips press to mine, soft and sultry. He holds there longer than I expect and even with my eyes closed, I can see the flash from cameras of onlookers.

*Ah... let ‘em look. This bad —and now good— boy is all mine.*

Be sure to let us know what you thought of [Bad Boy Makeover](#). Just a few words are so helpful both to other readers and to us to know what to bring to Last Chapter Press.

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