

Be My Valentine

“They’re on sale at Hubbard’s Sporting Goods,” Robert said, tilting the worn recliner backward as he settled in for an afternoon of football.

“A gun rack for your truck? Really?” the irritation in Julie’s voice elevated. “For Valentine’s Day? Could you be any more unromantic?”

“You could tie a bow around yourself and give it to me naked.” Robert teased as he pointed the remote at the flat screen. The sting of one of his wife’s infamous *looks* let him know he had crossed the line. “Just kid’n dear,” he said and clicked the ‘on’ button.

Julie grabbed her coat from the hall closet. “I’ve got errands,” she said and slammed the front door behind her. She did not believe for a second his feeble attempt to cover his *fopau* by pretending he was kidding. *He’s evidently done some price comparing*, Julie fumed in silence. She looked at her watch. Charlotte was waiting for her at the photography studio and she promised she would be there by noon.

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Julie never tired of admiring the crystal chandelier hanging in the reception area of Charlotte’s studio. The decor, like Charlotte, embodied an elegant flair. A chrome table hosted several photo books, one of which was Charlotte’s wedding album. Though Charlotte had already shared the album with her, it didn’t deter Julie from thumbing through the pages again. She couldn’t help but envy the beaming bride who smiled back at her from the photos that peppered the pages. Next to the bride stood her dark-haired groom. They gazed lovingly at one another, lost in the moment. Julie sighed, *so romantic*. She couldn’t remember the last time Robert had looked at her like that, or even if he ever had.

Julie's *girl next door* looks had a long history of unintentionally inviting friends, family, and even strangers to share their darkest secrets, and Charlotte had been no exception. Julie had spent her previous photo session listening to every detail of Charlotte and her ex-boyfriend's five-year volatile relationship. "Then I met and married John," Charlotte had gushed, "and he adores me."

"I see that," said Julie, wishing the stretch limo in the parking lot was waiting for her instead of Charlotte. "What's the occasion?"

"No occasion," replied Charlotte, "Like I said, he adores me."

Pangs of jealousy stabbed at Julie. She had never ridden in a limo. She and Robert had been high school sweethearts and their first born a surprise. Limos were no more a topic of conversation than diamonds and furs.

"Hey," said Charlotte, interrupting Julie's thoughts. "Can't wait for you to see the final prints. They're beautiful."

"We can thank Photoshop for that," said Julie laughing.

"No, no," Charlotte protested, "I did very little editing."

Julie smiled and pretended to believe her. She hoped her efforts to surprise Robert with boudoir photos would serve as a reminder that she was still a sexually attractive woman, and not just a wife and mother.

"My husband's here to take me to lunch," Charlotte said, "Come and meet him."

Julie returned the album to the table and followed Charlotte into the next room. A Nikon camera impaled on a tripod faced a white backdrop. Sitting on a stool in front of the backdrop was the dark-haired man from the wedding album. *Holy smokes*, gasped Julie, *he could be a cover model for Harlequin Romance*.

“John,” said Charlotte, “This is Julie,” John flashed a perfect set of pearly whites. Julie flushed.

“Oh,” said Julie, hoping her face wasn’t glowing red, “So you’re the prince charming who took Charlotte to dinner in a limo last week.”

Confusion replaced the smile on John’s face. He looked at Charlotte, then at Julie, then back at Charlotte. His dark eyes narrowed. “What limo?” He asked.

A suffocating silence followed. Sweat dampened the back of Julie’s neck; the color drained from her face. She looked to Charlotte, silently begging for help.

“Let’s get your photos,” said Charlotte, her voice trembling. She turned and led Julie into her office.

“I’m so sorry,” Julie whispered when Charlotte closed the door.

“No,” said Charlotte, “I’m sorry. I let you believe it was my husband picking me up in the limo. It was my ex-boyfriend.” Charlotte’s hands shook as she gathered up the photos spread out on her desk. “It isn’t what you think,” she explained, “He just wanted to talk.”

So he picks you up in a stretch limo? Julie silently questioned.

I have a business reputation to protect,” Charlotte pleaded, “so please keep this between us.”

Julie took the photos, handed Charlotte a check and left without commenting.

Escalating angry voices followed Julie as she headed towards the parking lot. “She’s so busted,” Julie said out loud as she unlocked her Ford Escort. Charlotte’s jag was parked next to her, but the pangs of jealousy she had felt earlier didn’t resurface.

Julie placed her Valentine photos on the seat next to her and turned the key in the ignition. She smiled, remembering her and Robert’s first Valentine’s Day and how, after

surprising him with a mint cake, he had broken out in hives; he hadn't wanted to spoil her efforts by admitting he was allergic to mint. She backed up the Escort. *And...*, she shifted into Drive, *there were the Valentine cards he purchased at the Dollar Store during their financially leaner years.* "I bought two," he had said, "because I love you twice as much as I did last year."

Oh, and not to forget last Valentine's Day, Julie recalled, when he gifted me a receipt as proof of purchase for the Lily's the florist failed to deliver. He even sprawled 'Be My Valentine' across the top and drew crude little hearts in the margins. A sudden warmth engulfed her. "Now that was romantic," she said to the empty seat. Her foot pressed harder on the gas pedal, Hubbard's Sporting Goods was on the way home and she wasn't one to pass up a good sale.