



Just
FOR
SHOW

JAE



Chapter 1

“WE NEED TO TALK,” ABBY said from somewhere behind her.

Claire barely heard her over the rattle of plates she was stacking on the buffet table. She threw a glance over her shoulder and laughed. “You might want to check out my latest podcast, honey. I just told my listeners never to start conversations with their spouses using those four little words. They make it sound as if something bad is going on.”

“But we *really* need to talk,” Abby said.

“One second, honey.” Claire slid the flower arrangement in the middle of the table more to the right. “Can you see if the bartender has everything he needs?”

“Claire, please.”

Something in Abby’s tone made the hairs on Claire’s neck stand on end, but she shook off the feeling. It was the day of their engagement party. Nothing unpleasant was allowed to intrude. She turned around.

Abby stood in the middle of their dining room, her back ramrod straight, her face pale, and the cocktail dress Claire had picked out for her to wear to the party suspiciously absent.

Claire tensed. “What’s wrong? Why aren’t you dressed yet? Our guests will be arriving any moment.”

“I know, but I...” Abby’s gaze darted to the bartender and to the cellist they had hired to provide unobtrusive background music. “Can we talk in the kitchen for a second?”

After one last glance back at the buffet table to make sure everything was the way she wanted it, Claire nodded and followed her.

Abby pulled out a stool from the kitchen island. "Sit."

That strange sense of dread niggled at the back of Claire's mind again. She eyed the stool. "We don't have time right now. Can't this wait?"

"No," Abby said, stony-faced. "It can't. I've tried to talk to you all day, but you haven't sat still even for a second."

Heat suffused Claire's face. "I want to make sure everything is perfect."

Abby squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again. For the first time in seven years, Claire couldn't read the look in the familiar blue irises. "Listen, Claire. I love you."

Claire beamed. "I love you too." She chuckled. "Which is a good thing since we're planning to get married."

"But I'm not in love with you anymore," Abby added.

The floor tilted beneath Claire's feet. She swayed and grabbed hold of the stool. "W-what? D-did you just say...?"

"I can't marry you."

A whooshing sound started to pulse in Claire's ears. "You don't mean that!"

Abby looked at her with a grave expression. "I'm afraid I do." Her voice was low and shaky, yet there was conviction in her tone too.

"But...but w-why? Is there someone else?" The thought stabbed her in the chest like a dagger.

"No. But going through with this would make us both unhappy."

"Unhappy?" Claire echoed. That was something her clients said during their couples therapy sessions. It didn't apply to her and Abby. "How can you say that? We're perfect together!"

"Perfect?" Abby laughed, a sound bare of any humor. "We rarely see each other. That's not perfect in my book."

"So we both have demanding jobs."

"No, Claire." Abby roughly shook her head. "I have a demanding job. You have an obsession. I'm tired of playing second fiddle to your job."

Claire bit her lip. "I could tell our office assistant not to fill my six o'clocks anymore and come home an hour early."

Abby's closed body language never changed. Her arms were folded over her chest so tightly that Claire wondered how she could even breathe. "Yeah, but that's the thing. Even when you're home, you never stop. You do a lot of things that your job doesn't really require. You're either recording

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a podcast, planning the next seminar, or working on your book. Other psychologists don't do all that stuff."

"Yeah, but other psychologists also don't want to take over a counseling center one day. I have to get my name out there, so just counseling clients isn't enough." Claire struggled to keep the defensiveness from her tone but had a feeling she was failing. "Besides, I'm done with the book now, so there's nothing stopping us from spending more time together."

Abby sighed. "I'm not sure that's what I want any longer. Even in your private life, you micromanage every little detail." She waved her hand in the direction of the buffet in the dining room. "It's exhausting!"

The words and Abby's tone were like a slap to the face. Stung, Claire flinched back. "I'm trying to create a nice home...a nice life for both of us."

"It's not working for me, Claire. I don't want to hurt you, but...it just isn't working."

"And you realize that now—five minutes before our engagement party? If you had any doubts about us, why didn't you talk to me when I first proposed to you?"

"I...I...I wanted to. Really. But..." Abby shrugged and stared off into space. "I guess I didn't know how to bring it up, so I tried to ignore it and hoped everything would get better."

It sounded like a bad joke. Here she was—a successful therapist who gave seminars on communication in relationships, and her own fiancée couldn't even talk to her?

Claire stared at the three-carat engagement ring on her finger. This had to be a bad dream. She would wake up any second, and then Abby and she would laugh about her stupid nightmare.

"Okay, so you have your doubts." She swallowed heavily. "But that's no reason to throw it all away. Maybe it's just wedding jitters or the stress of planning the party and the wedding. Just a rough patch. Every relationship has them."

That was what she always told her clients, but she had never believed that she would one day experience one too. There hadn't been any signs.

Or had she just not seen them?

"We can make it work." Claire tried to reach out and touch her, but Abby pulled her arm away before she could make contact. "We could go to couples therapy. I'm sure Renata could recommend a good thera—"

“No. The last thing we need is for you to tell our therapist what methods to use or how to do her job.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

Abby snorted. “Yes, you would. I’m done, Claire. I’ll move out first thing tomorrow morning.”

Done. Move out. The words echoed through Claire, filling spaces that had been overflowing with happiness and anticipation only five minutes earlier.

The doorbell rang.

Claire woke from her daze. *Our guests!* She pressed both hands to her mouth. “Oh God! What are we supposed to tell our friends and colleagues... and my parents?”

“You are the one who cares about appearances. You figure it out.” Abby pushed past her and walked out, stopping at the bar to down a glass of champagne.

Claire sank onto the stool and stared after her.

Chapter 2

Two months later

THE RINGING OF HER CELL phone made Claire look up from the patient file she had been reviewing. She had been staring at the same sentence for twenty minutes without registering a word. It seemed that was all she'd been doing for the past two months: staring. She had stared at the movers who had carried out boxes upon boxes of Abby's things, stared at Abby when she had handed over her key and her engagement ring, and stared at Abby's photo that she couldn't bring herself to remove from her desk.

She swallowed down the lump those memories had formed in her throat and squared her shoulders. *Come on. Pick up.* It could be a client in a crisis. But a glance at the display revealed that it was Mercedes, her friend and agent.

Oh, great. Mercedes was traveling a lot, so they hadn't talked in a while—since before Abby had called off the engagement, actually. Had Mercedes heard about the breakup now that she was back from Europe?

For a second, Claire considered not picking up. She wanted to forget about her failed relationship, not recount the painful details again, but she forced herself to be an adult and lifted the phone to her ear. "Hi, Mercedes."

"Guess what?"

Claire wasn't in the mood for guessing games, but she was used to keeping her own emotions in check, so she patiently said, "You won the lottery and are moving to the Bahamas?"

Mercedes snorted. "I wish. Not quite, but I've got good news anyway."

"I could use some good news," Claire muttered under her breath and then asked more loudly, "What is it?"

"Remember that publisher I pitched your manuscript to?"

Claire clutched the phone. "They want it?"

"It's not a definite yes, but based on your outline and the first five chapters we sent them, they think it might be a good fit for them. If we play our cards right, that book deal is yours, my friend."

"Wow, that's...wow." She had been working on the book for the past two years, first writing it and then trying to get it published. Now it was finally happening. At least one thing in her life wasn't falling apart. "So, how do we get the ball rolling?"

"Well, how does your schedule look at the end of June? Ms. Huge, their acquisitions editor, wants to read the rest of the manuscript and then meet you, so if you could take a few days off to fly to New York..."

Claire reached for her planner and leafed through it. The end of June... That would give her two months to clear her schedule. "That should be doable."

"Great. Then I'll let Ms. Huge know you and Abby will gladly meet her, provided that Abby will be able to take off a few days too."

"Sure." Then it hit her. "Uh, Abby?"

"Yeah. Ms. Huge said she's looking forward to meeting you and your fiancée." Mercedes chuckled. "Guess she wants to meet the woman who inspired the book about thriving love lives."

Claire took off her glasses and kneaded the bridge of her nose. She stared at the slightly out-of-focus version of Abby, who smiled at her from behind the glass of the picture frame on her desk. "There's, um, a problem with that. Abby and I..." She breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth. No matter how often she had to say it, it wasn't getting any easier. "We called off the engagement."

A gasp filtered through the line. Then there was only silence for a few moments.

"What did you just say?"

Claire refused to repeat it. Having to say it once was bad enough.

"Jesus, Claire! When did that happen? Your engagement party was barely two months ago, when I was in London!"

JUST FOR SHOW

“Um, yeah. It happened around that time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I...I guess I wasn’t ready to talk about it.” So far, she had kept the breakup on a need-to-know basis.

“I’m so sorry.” Mercedes groaned. “Dammit. That might be a deal breaker for the guys from Wishing Tree Publishing.”

“What? But that changes nothing!”

“It changes everything. In the nonfiction sector, the author and her marketability are as important as the book’s content. You’re lucky they didn’t bat an eye at you being gay. But if they find out you’re single, they won’t be happy.”

“So we’ll tell them I’m focusing on my career and the book right now. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing—if you’re writing a book on how to achieve your career goals. But last year, I pitched them a really good book on parenting. It was the best thing I have ever read on that topic. But they rejected it, just because the author doesn’t have kids herself. It’s about believability. How can they expect their readers to buy a book called *The Art of Lasting Relationships* if the author can’t even make her own relationship last?”

Claire sucked in a sharp breath and rubbed her breastbone. That was the crux of the matter, wasn’t it? With her decision to call off the engagement, Abby had changed much more than just Claire’s relationship status. Now her work life was in tatters too.

The silence stretched between them until Mercedes cleared her throat and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Claire’s dream of having her book published had been within her grasp, and she wasn’t ready to have that part of her life crumble the way her relationship had.

“Unless you have a replacement fiancée lying around somewhere, I’m afraid that ship has sailed.” Mercedes paused. “Oooh, wait a minute! That could actually work.”

“What could work?” Claire hadn’t heard any workable plan.

“If we find someone who’ll fly to New York with you and pretend to be your fiancée...”

Claire shook her head. “You’re insane.”

“I thought psychologists aren’t allowed to use words like that to label people.”

“The APA would make an exception for this crazy suggestion. Really, Mercedes! How would we even find someone who’d be willing to go along with something like that? Put out an ad on Craigslist? *Fake fiancée needed, no wifely duties required.*”

“No,” Mercedes said. “Working with an amateur in such a delicate situation wouldn’t be a good idea. We’d enlist a pro.”

“You want me to hire an escort?” Claire blurted. *Oops.* That had come out a little too loudly. She pressed a hand to her mouth and glanced at the door, hoping no one in the counseling center’s reception area had heard her. She didn’t need any rumors about her hiring call girls on top of all her other problems.

“Not that kind of pro,” Mercedes said. “This is LA, the city of smog and unemployed actors. I bet we could find someone who’d be willing to take over the lead role as your fiancée.”

For a second, Claire was tempted. A business arrangement with clear roles and expectations would be so much easier to handle than messy relationships. But true chemistry couldn’t be faked. No one would fall for it, and even if they did, it was completely unethical. “No, it would never work.”

“Trust me, with the right person, it would.”

Trust me, Claire repeated to herself. That was the problem. She could no longer trust anyone, not even her own judgment. *Especially* not her own judgment. “No,” she said again. “I guess we’ll just have to keep pitching it to other publishers.”

A knock came at the door. Tanya, the center’s office assistant, stuck her head into the room. “Dr. Renshaw, your ten o’clock is here.”

Claire gave her a nod. “Tell them to come in, please.” To Mercedes, she said, “I have to go.”

Thankfully, her ten o’clock appointment didn’t require much therapeutic finesse. The Varneys had been her clients for half a year, and today was their final session.

Claire sat in her oversized leather chair facing the couch and regarded them across the low coffee table. What a difference compared to their very first session! Back then, both had clung to the armrests on either end of the

JUST FOR SHOW

couch, sitting as far apart as possible. Now they were holding hands, their legs touching from hip to ankle.

Normally, Claire would have been overjoyed. She lived for moments like this, when she realized she had made a difference in her patients' lives. But today it drove home the failure of her own relationship. Why couldn't she and Abby have fought for their relationship the way the Varneys had? Had Abby considered it not worth fighting for? Tears burned in her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Mrs. Varney asked.

God, how unprofessional! Letting her emotions leak through like this had never happened to her before. She forced a smile, took a tissue from the box she kept on the table for her clients, and dashed it over her eyes. "Yes, of course. I'm just so happy for both of you. You did it. You really did it."

"Well, we had the best therapist in LA to help us." Mr. Varney grinned at her.

Claire smiled. "Thank you, but you two did all of the hard work."

The Varneys beamed at her, then at each other.

Their look of pure happiness hurt, but this time Claire had braced herself against it and was able to switch into therapist mode. "So," she looked from one to the other, "what do you think needs to happen for your relationship to continue to thrive instead of returning to the way it was when you first came to see me?"

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Forty-five minutes later, the small, silver clock on the end table next to Claire indicated that the session was coming to an end. She wished the Varneys all the best and walked them to the door.

When they left the center, she slumped against the doorjamb and stared after them. God, she really needed to get a grip and stop all that staring!

"Hi, Claire."

A low voice next to her made Claire jump. When she whirled around, she came face-to-face with the last person she wanted to see: Dr. Vanessa West, one of the center's nine psychologists—and her biggest rival for clinical director once Renata retired in a couple of years.

Claire put on her best professional mask. "Hi, Vanessa."

Vanessa stepped closer and reached out to touch her arm.

What the heck? Claire stared at the hand on her arm. *What's up with her?* They weren't exactly friends.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your breakup."

Vanessa sounded sincere, but Claire stiffened. How on earth had Vanessa found out? Claire hadn't wanted it to become common knowledge at the center. Here she was supposed to be the one others came to for help, not the one with the problem. She hadn't even taken a day off so she could hole up at home and cry her eyes out. "Thanks," she forced out. "But it's okay, really."

"You're allowed to be heartbroken, you know? You need to let yourself feel it."

Claire didn't appreciate having that therapist voice used on her. "And I would, if I were heartbroken."

Vanessa blinked. "You aren't? But Linda said Abby was the one who ended it."

Dammit, Linda! Why did Abby's best friend have to run her big mouth and embarrass her in front of everyone? Claire struggled to keep her expression neutral. "It was an amicable breakup, and it happened two months ago. We have both moved on."

Vanessa raised her perfectly sculpted eyebrows and pierced her with that all-knowing therapist look. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Claire said. "In fact, I've already started seeing someone else."

They stared at each other.

Claire was just as surprised as Vanessa. Why had she said that? She wasn't normally one to blurt out ridiculous stuff like that, but now she couldn't take it back, at least not without humiliating herself even more—and she would rather die than to do that. Her therapist mask firmly in place, she held Vanessa's gaze.

"Well," Vanessa finally said, "good for you, I guess. But if you ever need to talk, let me know."

Hell would freeze over before that happened. Vanessa would use any sign of weakness on her part to gain an advantage. "Thanks. But my girlfriend is a wonderful listener."

"You'll have to introduce us sometime." Vanessa patted Claire's arm. "Why don't you bring her to Renata's party?"

JUST FOR SHOW

“Uh, I’ll see if she can make it. Now if you’ll excuse me. I’ve got paperwork to do before my next clients arrive.” She stepped back and closed her office door firmly between them before slumping into the chair behind her desk.

God, what had she been thinking? Now Vanessa expected her to show up at the party with a doting girlfriend, and Claire wasn’t even ready for a casual date. She had painted herself into a corner with no way out but forward.

Her gaze went to the phone. Should she call Mercedes and...? *No*. It was silly. Ridiculous. Dangerous. If any of her clients entertained an idea like that, she would definitely advise against it.

But if she didn’t present a new girlfriend or even fiancée soon, she’d lose the book deal and would go from being a respected couples therapist to the poor woman her colleagues pitied because she couldn’t keep her own relationship going—much less anyone else’s.

She reached for the phone.

As soon as Mercedes picked up, she blurted out, “I’ll do it,” so she wouldn’t have time to back out.

“Uh, do what?” Mercedes asked.

Abby’s blue eyes seemed to watch her from the framed photo, judging her, taunting her.

Claire reached out and picked up the photo. She traced the familiar features with her thumb, but it didn’t bring her the feeling of comfort and safety it had evoked in the past.

“Do what?” Mercedes asked again.

After one last second of hesitation, Claire dropped the photo into the wastebasket with a resounding *thud* and took a deep breath. “Get a fake fiancée.”

Chapter 3

TWO DAYS LATER, CLAIRE JUMPED up from the visitor's chair in Mercedes's office. "You did what?"

"I put out a casting call."

"Do I need to remind you that you are not Steven Spielberg? This is my life, not a blockbuster movie!"

Mercedes held up her hands in a placating way. "How long have we known each other?"

"Um, ever since you helped Renata get her book published, so about... five years, I guess."

"And in those five years, have I ever steered you wrong?" Mercedes continued without waiting for a reply. "There's a reason directors put out casting calls. If they are trying to fill the role of the love interest, they have actors come in to do a chemistry test."

An image of Bunsen burners and bubbling chemicals rose in Claire's mind's eye. "Chemistry test?"

"Yeah, you know. To see if the actors have a connection that will convince the audience they're really in love."

Like Bogart and Bacall or Powell and Loy. Claire nodded to herself. That actually made sense. Kind of. "So you told your contacts in the movie industry...what?" *That you're looking for an actress willing to play the fiancée of a pathetic couples therapist who couldn't even save her own relationship?*

"I kept it as vague as possible," Mercedes said. "Basically, I told them it's a special project that needs absolute discretion."

JUST FOR SHOW

Discretion was good. Claire's tension eased. "So how many actresses have you lined up out there?" She pointed to the reception area of Mercedes's literary agency.

"Just one for today. If this one doesn't work out, I have a couple of others that look promising. But I thought we should keep the circle small for now and start with the one my friend Jill recommended."

"Anyone I'd know?" Claire asked.

Mercedes shook her head. "If you would recognize her from a movie, Ms. Huge or someone else at the publishing house might too. We need someone with acting experience, but not a recognizable TV personality. Plus even you can't afford to hire Angelina Jolie."

"Right." Claire squinted over at her agent. "Have you done this before?" Usually, Claire was the one with the detailed battle plan, but now Mercedes seemed to have thought of everything.

"Held auditions for a fake fiancée?" Mercedes chuckled. "Nope. But it's kinda fun, don't you think?"

"Fun?" Claire's idea of fun was a bubble bath and a glass of Pinot Noir, not trying to stop her tattered life from fraying even more by coming up with a harebrained scheme.

"Yeah. Come on." Mercedes patted her on the back. "Let's go watch her make googly eyes at you."

"What?"

"Chemistry test, remember?"

"Oh Christ." Why the hell had she ever thought this was a good idea?

* * *

How strange. Lana looked around the waiting room, then glanced at her wristwatch. She was only a couple of minutes early, so where were the other actresses? If an assistant hadn't told her to wait right here, she would have thought she was in the wrong place.

Usually, at auditions, she was surrounded by at least a dozen actresses who looked like her, all full-figured brunettes in their late twenties who were nervously studying their lines and eyeing the competition.

But this time, she was waiting alone, and there was no script to study. Did the casting director want her to do a cold read?

Her friend Jill hadn't told her much—or anything, really—about this movie. Apparently, the person Jill had talked to had been pretty secretive and had revealed only that they needed an “unconventional actress for an unconventional project,” preferably a lesbian or bisexual woman.

It was probably some small independent film that no one had ever heard of. But at this point, Lana wasn't picky about her roles.

In the two years since the accident, her sole claim to stardom had been playing a corpse on a crime show. With just a handful of commercials and her job at the coffee shop, she could barely make ends meet.

“Ms. Henderson?”

Lana looked up. “Yes?”

A Latin American woman in her forties stood before her. “I'm Mercedes Soto. Thanks for coming.”

“My pleasure.” Lana stood and focused on not limping as she followed her down the hall to the audition room.

The first thing she noticed after entering was that there was no camera and no camera operator. Apparently, they weren't taping the audition. Just how low-budget was this production?

But a badly paid acting gig was better than none.

Lana gripped the folder with her headshot and her admittedly modest acting resume and smiled at the only other person in the room, a woman she guessed to be a few years older than her own twenty-nine. Was she the casting director's assistant?

No, Lana decided. She was too well-dressed for that. Everything about the woman was refined: her blonde hair secured in an elegant chignon, the turquoise silk scarf knotted around her neck that gave her pale gray eyes a greenish tint, and the formfitting pencil skirt hugging her slim hips.

When the woman crossed the room to shake Lana's hand, Lana noticed her shoes. The modestly heeled pumps looked as if they had cost more than Lana's rent.

Definitely not an assistant. Maybe someone sponsoring the movie?

Whoever she was, her expression didn't bode well for Lana's chances of getting the part. The woman stared at her with obvious dismay. Had she wanted to cast a different type of actress? Maybe one of those size-zero stick figures? Or was it the scar or the tattoo peeking out from the short sleeve of the blouse she'd bought for the audition?

JUST FOR SHOW

Lana held her head up high and looked her square in the eyes. She had encountered that attitude hundreds of times in showbiz and refused to let it intimidate her—or let it make her hate the way she looked.

As if she had guessed what Lana was thinking, the woman's expression cleared. "Hi, I'm Claire Renshaw." Her tone was carefully neutral, and she didn't add anything that told Lana what role she played in the production.

"Lana Henderson. Nice to meet you."

The woman's hand was slender and felt pleasant—if a little damp—in her own. Why the hell was she so nervous? Was she an actress reading for a role in the movie too?

Lana glanced around. No script on the table. Apparently, they wanted her to do improv. No problem. Lana had learned to work with unexpected situations and could improvise at a moment's notice.

"Here's what I want you to do," Ms. Soto said. "Make me believe you're madly in love with Claire. You're comfortable being, um, close to a woman, right?"

Lana smiled. For once, being a lesbian worked in her favor. "Very comfortable." Playing a romantic scene with Claire Renshaw definitely wouldn't be a hardship. Even if she was too stuffy and uptight to be Lana's type, she was undeniably attractive. "Any directions?"

"No," Ms. Soto said. "Just show me how you'd sell the two of you being deeply in love."

"All right." Lana took a moment to center herself, pushed back all thoughts of rent and medical bills, and slipped into the role of Claire's lover. "Claire." She dropped her voice to a sexy murmur.

Claire's gaze flicked to her. A frown wrinkled her smooth brow.

Oh man. That looks like indigestion, not infatuation! Whoever Claire was, she wasn't a fellow actress. She didn't give Lana much to work with. *God, I hate working with amateurs.* But she was determined to land this role, so she took a step closer, right into Claire's personal space.

The other woman's body heat engulfed her, and a light, springlike fragrance teased Lana's nose. *Hmm. Nice.* She allowed herself to react to it and lean even closer, using her body's instinctive response to sell them being in love.

If circumstances had been different, Lana might have tried to get the casting director's attention with a hot kiss, but she had a feeling if she tried

that, it would earn her a slap instead of the role. So she gently took Claire's hand and lifted it to her lips.

Claire watched her with wide eyes, her hand limp in Lana's grasp. Definitely not one for improvisation.

Lana turned Claire's hand around and teased the fair skin at the inside of her wrist with her breath before whispering a kiss on the pulse throbbing beneath her lips.

A visible shudder went through Claire. "Uh, I think that's enough." She tugged her hand free and stepped away.

Enough? They hadn't even improvised a conversation.

"Would you mind waiting outside for a second?" Ms. Soto asked.

Lana perked up. That wasn't the "don't call us, we'll call you" she had expected. Had she done so well that they would now bring in the real actor or actress she'd star with in the movie and test them together?

"Sure. I'll be right outside." Lana nearly skipped to the door, despite her protesting leg. In her mind's eye, she could already see her name rolling down the screen in the closing credits of a romance flick.

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Mercedes beamed at her. "What do you think? She was perfect, wasn't she?"

"Perfect?" Claire echoed. Then, suddenly reminded of that conversation when Abby had broken up with her, she paused and inhaled deeply, trying to wrestle down the rising nausea. "She's about as far from perfect as you can get! No one will believe for even a second that I'm engaged to someone like her!"

"Why? What's wrong with her?"

"What isn't?" Claire shot back. "She's not my type at all." She liked women who were successful, sophisticated, and reliable. Someone like Abby. Claire sighed. Lana Henderson couldn't be more different from Abby if she'd tried. "Did you see the tattoo?"

The short sleeves of the actress's blouse revealed a tattoo of what looked like a bird of prey. Its wings and long tail feathers were inked in all the colors of the rainbow, while its head and body glowed in hues of red and orange, almost as if the bird were on fire.

"Did you see the scar?" Mercedes asked softly.

JUST FOR SHOW

Claire's anger deflated, and she lowered her gaze. "Yes, I did."

A jagged, purple scar zigzagged horizontally across Lana's left arm, just above the bend of her elbow. The inked bird spread its wings above it, gripping the scar in its claws as if it were a snake.

If Claire had been in her shoes, she would have chosen a tattoo that concealed the scar rather than one that called attention to it—not that she was the type to get a tattoo. She also wouldn't have worn a short-sleeved blouse that revealed the scar during an audition.

Why on earth had Mercedes thought a woman like Lana Henderson would be a good fit for the role of her fiancée?

Claire blew out a breath. "Listen, I'm not trying to be mean."

The poor actress didn't deserve to be judged this harshly. She might actually be a nice person, and with her sun-kissed skin, her dazzling girl-next-door smile, and her wavy, light brown hair, she was definitely pretty. Her voice was sexy, reminding Claire of Lauren Bacall or another sultry movie star from an old black-and-white movie. If she paid more attention to what she wore, Claire thought she'd be downright stunning.

"But she's not what we're looking for. We need someone...classy. She had the price tag still sticking out from the back of her blouse, for Christ's sake!"

"That's exactly why she's perfect for the role of your fiancée." Mercedes held her gaze. "No offense, Claire, but you can be a little...intimidating to other women."

Claire crossed her arms. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're so put-together. So perfect. A stinking rich family, a doctorate from an expensive private university, and a house that looks like a feature in *Architectural Digest*... Few women can live up to that. What we need is someone more approachable at your side. Someone your readers will be able to relate to. Someone who's curvy, tattooed, and having the occasional wardrobe malfunction."

Claire loosened her stance. "You're the expert. But please tell me you at least ran a background check on her."

"Of course. There are no skeletons hiding in her closet—and she isn't either. Jill says she's out and proud, so no one will bat an eye when she suddenly announces her engagement to a woman."

"Good, but that's not really what I'm worried about."

“I checked her out, Claire. Really. I wouldn’t make you live with an ax murderer.”

A heavy feeling settled in the pit of Claire’s stomach. “Live with...? Wait a minute! Who said anything about living together?”

“If you want people to think you’re in love and committed to each other, you can’t keep separate houses.”

“Who says we can’t be a happily committed couple who enjoys having our own space?”

“Actually, you do.” Mercedes opened a desk drawer and pulled out a stack of paper. “Chapter five.” She opened the manuscript, leafed through it, and then read, “Moving in together before getting married will give you a realistic idea about cute and not-so-cute little quirks and will teach you to work as a team in everyday life.” She slapped the manuscript onto her desk in front of Claire. “Those are your words, Claire. If you want people to take you seriously, you’ve got to practice what you preach.”

“Can’t I rewrite that chapter instead?” Claire grumbled.

Mercedes just gave her a look.

Oh God. This is a nightmare. Claire rubbed her face with both hands and groaned into her palms. “Okay,” she said from behind her fingers. “I’ll do it.”

Mercedes put the manuscript back into the drawer. “So I can tell her she’s got the job?”

Claire sighed. Maybe picking someone who wasn’t her type had its advantages. At least there was no danger of her falling in love with this actress. This would be a mutually beneficial business arrangement, nothing more. “Yes. I guess she’ll do.”

* * *

Lana drilled her nails into her palms as she followed Ms. Soto into the audition room. *Oh, please, please, please...* She looked at the two women, trying to read their expressions.

Ms. Soto smiled at her, but Claire looked about as happy as someone who had just received a prison sentence.

Was that a good or a bad sign?

“Please take a seat, Ms. Henderson,” Ms. Soto said.

“Lana, please.”

JUST FOR SHOW

“Then please call me Mercedes.”

Lana nodded and took the chair next to Claire, facing Mercedes, who sat behind the desk.

“Before we tell you anything else, we need you to sign this.” Mercedes slid two sheets of paper across the desk.

Lana couldn't help grinning. “Does that mean I've got the role?”

“Yes.”

A flare of elation rushed through Lana. She barely held herself back from pumping her fist. “Great.” She nodded in Claire's direction. “So will she be my co-star?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“That's...uh, wonderful.” Lana pasted an enthusiastic smile on her face. “Working with new actresses is always so...exciting!” She flicked her gaze to Claire and gave her an encouraging nod. “I mean, we've all been where you are with your acting, just starting out. Don't worry, I'll give you some pointers. Unless, of course, you really aren't comfortable starring in a lesbian movie.” Maybe that was why her fellow actress had been so wooden. She turned back toward Mercedes and tried not to look hopeful when she added, “In that case, maybe recasting my co-star might be a good idea.”

As soon as she'd said it, she scolded herself. An actress with no real roles in the past two years couldn't afford to be picky about her co-star. What if Claire was friends with the producer or something, and that was how she'd gotten the role?

Claire scowled at her. Somehow, her elegant features still managed to look refined.

Mercedes giggled. “I'm afraid recasting is not an option.”

“I wish it were,” Claire muttered.

“No problem.” Lana had worked with untalented actresses before. It beat having no acting work at all. “So, where do I sign?”

“Um, hold your horses,” Mercedes said. “You might not want the role after hearing all the details.”

Why wouldn't she? Roles for more curvaceous actresses weren't exactly in abundant supply in Hollywood, so she would say yes to pretty much any gig. Unless...

“This isn't a porn production, is it?”

Claire started to sputter, then cough. Her fair cheeks flushed. “No! Nothing like that.”

“There’s actually even a celibacy clause in the contract,” Mercedes added.

A celibacy clause? What the hell? This wasn’t some kind of Christian production, was it?

“I’ll explain in a second. But first, I need you to sign this.” Mercedes nodded down at the papers on her desk.

Lana leaned forward and picked up the top sheet, expecting it to be the contract. Instead, the paper said *non-disclosure agreement*. They wanted her to sign an NDA? She looked from Mercedes to Claire and back. Jeez, what kind of movie were they filming?

Well, I guess you’ll find out once you sign it. She took the pen Mercedes handed her, signed on the dotted line, and slid the agreement across the desk.

Mercedes took it and put it in a drawer. “Do you want to explain your situation, Claire?”

Claire slid her palms over her black pencil skirt as if wanting to remove invisible wrinkles. “I’m actually not an actress.”

No shit, Sherlock. Lana smiled. “I kinda guessed that. But we’ve all got to start somewhere.”

“No, you don’t understand. I don’t have any ambition to become an actress. I’m a psychologist.”

“Oh. So this is some kind of documentary or a reality TV show? Please tell me you don’t want me to play a patient. Because I’ve got to tell you, ladies, that’s pretty much the only couch that I avoid at all costs—well, that and casting couches.” Lana managed to lighten her tone and make it sound like a joke, but she was actually serious.

Claire shook her head. “No, don’t worry. I don’t want you to be my patient.” She inhaled and exhaled deeply, as if she needed to brace herself for what she was about to say next. “I want you to be my girlfriend.”

For a moment, all Lana could do was stare at her. Was this some kind of joke? Then the humor of the situation overcame her. “Shouldn’t you at least buy me dinner first?”

Mercedes muffled a giggle behind her palm.

Claire wasn’t laughing, though. She glared at Lana.

JUST FOR SHOW

“Would someone please tell me what this is all about?” Lana asked.

“Claire is trying to get her relationship-advice book published,” Mercedes finally said.

Lana nearly groaned out loud. *Oh man*. So Claire was one of those. A self-appointed relationship guru who made money off vulnerable people. People like Lana’s mother. “What exactly would my role be in this scenario?”

“Well, you see, Claire’s fiancée recently broke up with her, and if the publisher finds out, her book deal could be in trouble. If you want to sell a book on lasting relationships, you need to actually be in one.”

“That makes sense, I guess.” Lana turned her head to look at Claire, who was white-knuckling the armrests of her chair. “So let me get this straight, Ms. Renshaw...or not so straight, in this case. You want me to be your fake girlfriend.”

“Fake fiancée, actually,” Claire said. “And it’s *Dr.* Renshaw.”

“Wow. I don’t know if I want to contribute to that.”

“I can understand your concern,” Mercedes said. “I mean, it’s a highly unusual situation and not exactly what you were expecting when you came here today.”

That wasn’t what made Lana hesitate. But did she really want to help Claire get her self-help book published? One more book that told women like her mother that they needed to be in a relationship and shell out hundreds or thousands of dollars for intimacy workshops and get-in-touch-with-your-feelings retreats in order to be happy.

But then again, her landlord wouldn’t care about her personal opinion on self-help books when her rent was overdue.

“What kind of compensation would I receive?”

Mercedes took another document from a drawer and handed it to her. “You’ll find that information on page two of the contract.”

Lana turned the top page and found the number. *Holy crap. Fifty thousand?* That was more than she had earned with her acting in the past two years. If Claire could drop that amount of money on a ruse like this, therapists were definitely overpaid.

“Plus I’ll pay for all expenses such as any new articles of clothing you might need,” Claire added.

Was that a snipe at her style of dress? Lana chose to ignore it. “What exactly do you expect me to do for that kind of money? We wouldn’t actually have to get married, would we?”

Claire’s eyes went wide. “No!”

Jeez, how about making the idea of getting married to me not sound quite so horrible?

“No,” Claire repeated more softly. “I guess we could just have a long engagement. That would be pretty believable, actually, since I’m very busy with my job.”

“How long exactly are we talking?” Lana asked.

Claire shrugged. “For however long it takes for me to get the book deal. I’m meeting with the acquisitions editor at the end of June, so my guess is two or three months at the most. Once the contract is signed, we could quietly dissolve our engagement.”

That didn’t sound so bad. It wasn’t as if she had any exciting roles lined up for the next couple of months anyway. “That works for me. If it takes longer, I could make myself available.” For some extra payment, of course.

“Great, but I’m hoping that won’t be necessary,” Claire said.

“What would my duties as your fiancée be during that time? You don’t expect any bedroom privileges, do you?” She made good use of her acting skills and lent her tone an almost horrified note, just to get back at Claire for sounding so appalled at the idea of marrying her.

“No, of course not! It would be purely a business arrangement, a relationship only on paper, not when we’re alone.”

“Plus we’d also expect you to not sleep with or date anyone else during the length of the contract,” Mercedes added. “We can’t have anyone think that you’re cheating on Claire. Is that a problem for you?”

“Not in the least.” Lana had been single for two years and had no intention of changing that anytime soon. She read over the rest of the contract—the celibacy clause, the compensation, the demand for twenty-four/seven availability. All were fine with her. Then she paused and looked up. “Cohabitation?”

Claire sighed. “It would be best if you’d move in with me to prove that we’re a happily committed couple.”

“Couldn’t we be a happily committed couple who decides to wait to share a bedroom—and a house—until we’re married?”

JUST FOR SHOW

Mercedes laughed. "I think you two will get along just fine."

Lana and Claire glanced at each other.

Claire looked as unconvinced as Lana felt. Finally, Claire said, "It's not as if we'll be living together forever." She sounded as if she needed to convince herself as much as Lana. "Once I sign the contract, you can move out right away, and I will tell everyone we broke up because I realized I'm not over my fiancée...ex-fiancée."

Lana considered it. Fifty thousand dollars was a lot of money, and it was an acting gig...kind of...even if she wouldn't be able to put it on her resume. She would even save on utilities for a couple of months while she lived with Claire.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she picked up the pen again and signed the contract. "Congratulations, sweetheart." She batted her lashes at Claire. "You got yourself a fiancée."

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BY JAE

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