

Prompt: Elana has arrived at a restaurant to meet her first date—a man she met on a dating app—following a broken engagement from a cheating fiancé. Her date is late so she grabs a seat at the bar to have a drink while she waits for her date to arrive. She sits next to Stefan and the “meet cute” happens.

I forgot how uncomfortable designer heels could be. After all, I'd perfected my post-Shane couch potato technique pretty quickly after the breakup. He was the rabid high heel fan, not me. Looking back, I should've just told him to wear the damn heels himself if he loved them so much, but I hadn't. I'd swallowed my pride, smiled, and gone along with his delusions. More fool me.

So, here I am, wearing the one pair of heels I hadn't sold on consignment, paired with a dress that I'd bought with the cash from my pawned engagement ring. Shane was a bastard, but he liked quality, so I'd made out like a bandit. Turned out, he liked to treat his woman well.

No, let me correct that. Women.

There was the shoulder clench, followed by the teeth grinding. A deep breath calms my easily triggered heart, and I relax just enough. Even after four months of therapy and lots of “working on myself,” just the thought of Shane is enough to throw me off my game. Every clenched smile, quiet nod, and simpering giggle I'd given him had come complete with those aching, painful shoulders and tight jaw. Now, with just one memory, I'd wasted hundreds of dollars in massage work. Typical. I didn't need this level of stress on the way to a date.

It could be that I'm not built for this relationship stuff. At least, not right now. Maybe not ever. My mind isn't willing to go through the wringer again, and my heart checked out a long while ago. The body, however...she's still raring to go, which is why I'm teetering on these godforsaken stilt heels on the way to The Leader, one of the trendiest hotel bars in New York City.

I'll be honest. The Leader was exactly where I'd met Shane. It's a cursed place, and I have no idea why I'm headed there. It isn't my kind of bar, because it attracts finance guys with big wallets and massive egos. But, I'm hard up. I need something, and Bang Bang Paul was going to give it to me tonight, hopefully several times over.

Yes, I've resorted to the Bang Bang app for a date. Bang Bang promises a good time, not a long time, and that's exactly the level of commitment I'm able to handle at the moment. I even pay extra for the VIP level matches, and it seems to have delivered. My date, Paul, is gorgeous, claims to be well-endowed, and is a dominant Scorpio. Knowing my luck, this is all a lie, but I'm going to give this man the benefit of the doubt and let him buy me several overpriced drinks and a really great dinner. Then, I'm going to have mind-blowing, memory-wiping, aura-cleansing sex and leave right afterwards.

I see The Leader up ahead and pick up my phone to send a safety text to Simone, best friend and cavalry if something should go wrong. I might be horny, but I'm not stupid. No one night stand is worth my death, and my best friend wholly supports my search for restorative sex.

Just got to the Leader. Am headed to the roof bar.

Simone replies quickly. *Great. Don't forget to send me a picture of him.*

I won't, I reply back as I walk through the lobby to the elevator. *I hope this guy is as good as his profile promises. I'm really tired of disappointment.*

“Another Moscow Mule, sweetie?” The bartender, a cute redheaded guy with deep dimples, gives me the look that every single woman dreads: the sympathetic, yet knowing, look. The one that says, *I know your date no-showed, and you look fancy for nothing.*

Talk about disappointment.

“Um, no. Thanks, though.”

He grinned. “You sure? It's happy hour, two for one.”

A quick glance at my watch tells me the truth. “It's 8:45. I'm pretty sure it's a little late for happy hour down here in the financial district.”

“It's your lucky night. I'm eloping with my boyfriend tomorrow, and you look like you need to be drunk. So, I'll just be getting you a refill. It's on me.”

“Well, in that case, thanks. And congrats on your wedding.”

“Why, thank you! It's nuts that it's even happening. We've only been dating for about six months, but I guess crazier things have happened. You never know who you'll meet when you're just living life.”

“Or, not meet,” I mutter to myself.

“Were you supposed to see someone tonight? You look gorgeous, by the way.”

I could feel my cheeks and ears start to burn in embarrassment. Might as well be honest and spill my guts out. “This is a Bang Bang date gone horribly wrong. I got a text about a half an hour ago from this guy, Paul, saying that he's running late at work, and that he'd try to get here by nine. I'm thinking that's a lie.”

“Well, he's an idiot,” the bartender replies. “If I were you, I'd suddenly be busy doing something else, honestly.”

“I mean, you're not wrong.” I chuckle as I sip my drink, then let out a mindless hum of satisfaction. “I don't think I can be sad after I finish this drink. Good job...”

“Joey.”

“Joey. Right. You're amazing, Joey. I should just let you plan the rest of my evening. You seem to make better choices than I do.”

He laughs. “Look, don't get it twisted. My plans mess up in the most spectacular ways

sometimes.”

“How?”

“I’m getting married to a one-night stand, honey, Things definitely didn’t go the way I thought they would.”

I think of Shane and our very well-planned first date to one of the best restaurants in the city. He’d been so thoughtful and thorough. At the time, I’d seen his meticulous planning as an indicator of his feelings and desire to please me. Man, was I wrong.

In the distance, I hear the soft ding of the elevator, followed by a few hushed words to the hostess at the reservation booth. Judging by her flirty giggles, someone was charming the pants off of her. I’m nosy, so I have to look and see what’s going on.

The guest, a tall man in a dark gray suit and tie, looks buttoned up but sleek. Not slick, Sleek. He’s effortlessly elegant and classy-looking, but is completely comfortable in his skin. His long fingers – supple digits free of a pesky wedding ring - gracefully tap the edge of the host box as he speaks. The hostess absolutely can’t tear her eyes away until a new couple approaches the stand. He smiles and gives the stand a final tap before he walks away.

My head-on view of him takes me by surprise. Holy shit, he’s gorgeous. The dark hair and pale eye combo always kills me. His confident walk just adds to his sexiness, and my ears start to heat up. Who needs Bang Bang Paul when this guy exists?

“I see you’ve noticed Stefan.”

Shaking my head a little to bring me back to Earth, I grab a cooling sip of my drink. “It’s hard not to. Wow.”

Joey snickers from in front of the beer taps, where he pours what appears to be a local IPA. To my alarm, he sets a coaster down at the spot next to me, followed by the beer.

“Who’s that for?”

He cocked his brow. “Oh, I think you know, sweetheart. Hey, Stefan! What’s up, man?”

The scent of woody cologne surrounds me suddenly, and I hear that accent loud and clear, right next to me, exchanging the usual greetings. They clasp hands for a second, and Mr. Charming settles himself right next to me.

My drink suddenly becomes super fascinating.

“How's work? Any good stories lately?”

Stefan takes a sip of his beer and rolls his eyes. “It's not been a good day, boss. It started a right mess, and it'll end up that way, too, if things don't change.”

What was that accent, British? Aussie? I can't place it. Whatever it is, though, it's sexy and I'm intrigued. Not enough to join conversation, mind you, but enough to eavesdrop.

“Sorry to hear that. Anything I can help you with?”

“Yeah,” Stefan ruefully looked at his phone, then tossed it on the counter. “I need a date.”

I'd never seen someone polish a glass as nonchalantly as Joey does in this moment.

“What kind of date? You're at a bar in a hotel, handsome. Not that it's my business, but...”

“Not that kind, for God's sake. I was supposed to go to an event tonight, and now, I can't. I don't have a date. I did have one, but my lady friend backed out at the last minute. I've got to be a bit undercover for this one, and I'll look odd if I'm wandering about on my own, understood?”

I was certain that my ears were going to burn right off my head. Time for another sip.

“Actually,” Joey muses, “it's so funny you should be in this situation, because...what's your name, gorgeous?”

Why didn't the floor just open up so I could escape?

“Elana. My name is Elana.”

His smile is smug and self-satisfied. “Elana. What a pretty name! Anywho, Elana here was supposed to meet her date tonight, and he's a no-show. Pity, especially since she's all

dressed up, don't you think?"

Stefan looks at me, and I could almost feel him sizing me up. I can't be mad about it, especially since I did the same to him, but no man gets to evaluate me like I'm a piece of meat. He was going to look me in the eye and approach me on my level. I'd never look away from a man's eyes again. I was no one's prey.

"Nice to meet you, Elana. I'm Stefan."

I shake his extended hand, making sure to give what I call the Professional Networking with Men handshake. His eyebrows rise slightly.

"Nice to meet you. Sorry to hear about your situation."

"Yes, it's aggravating, but I'll cope. I'm sorry about your date."

"It happens." My shrug was genuine. Paul who? "Why would you need to go undercover? Are you a secret agent or something?"

He laughs. "Oh, God no! A journalist. I'm supposed to meet a source at this party."

"And you can't go alone?"

With a grimace, he shakes his head. "Um, no. A single man would look very suspect at this kind of thing."

Just talking to this guy causes my nervous ear flush to turn into the sort of full-body slow burn that makes me shift on the stool. "Okay, spill. What kind of party is this?"

His eyes wander around, looking for a savior. Joey had helpfully removed himself to the other side of the bar, so he'd be no help.

"I'm telling you this out of necessity, I suppose. It's a sex party."

My eyes roll clear to the other side of my skull. "Seriously? Come up with something better than that."

"I'm serious!"

"This is a new one, dude. You get points for originality."

He took another sip of his beer. "Joey will vouch for me. I'm a features writer for *New Contemporary*, and this is an honest-to-goodness source for a huge story. I have to go. The contact is flying out of the country tomorrow, and I won't get another shot with them. They made that clear."

Grabbing my phone, I open a popular social media app that I know is chock full of journalists. If this guy is who he says he is, he'll be on here. "Okay, what's your last name? You're Stefan what?"

His sigh is worthy of an irritated teenager with better things to do.

"I mean, I can go home. My house and bed are lovely."

I get a small, conciliatory nod to the side. "Wainright."

The search wheel spins for only a second, then I see a result: Stefan Wainright, Lead Features Writer for *New Contemporary*.

My eyebrow shot up. This magazine is known affectionately as "*Vanity Fair's* less celebrity-obsessed cousin" on social media, the latest hotbed of smart journalism and cutting, share-worthy opinion. He's well-known, with 375k followers, a VIP seal on his name, and a black-and-white headshot that could rival an editorial model's in smolder and sexy.

Do NOT act thirsty, I tell myself as my interest rachets up to a million.

"Hmmm." I put the phone back down, knowing that my nonchalant tone makes a liar out of me. "Alright. I guess I believe you."

"Well, I'm glad for that."

"That's quite the situation there, Stefan."

"It is."

Might as well go in for the kill.

"What are you going to do about it?"

He took another drink. "I'm going to ask you to come with me, of course."

I laugh, mostly because I already know that I'm going to do it. I'd be an idiot not to. Then again, Mr. Journalist Supermodel could be a psycho, so I'm also an idiot if I accept. If nothing else, this will be a great story to tell my fictional children one day.

"I knew you were going to say that."

"Come on, old girl. What other chance will you have to do something like this in your lifetime? Plus, I'm a gentleman, I promise. You'll be completely safe."

"Oh, I know I will," I respond smoothly, "because I'm going to text my bestie exactly where I'm going, along with your name. At least you're well known. She'll know where to look if I turn up dead."

He nods. "Fair enough. Let me pay the bill and we can get going." He catches Joey's eye, ignores his knowing smirk, and plops his card on the counter.

"What else do I need to know about this?"

"Oh, plenty. I'll fill you in on the way over."

I grab for my jacket, but he beats me to it and holds it up. Manners, manners. "Well, this is definitely better than a Bang Bang date."

"I'll say. Prepare yourself. I have a feeling we're in for quite the adventure tonight."