

Handbags by Monica

“The Real Monica: Enter Here.” The words sent Juan Pablo and me into a fit of choking, gasping laughter. We were squeezed into his desk chair, nursing mugs of black coffee and hangovers. Juan Pablo clicked the mouse and we entered there, to view the Real Monica Lewinsky’s real handbags.

This was the final morning I would spend with Juan Pablo in his apartment—in his bedroom, in his desk chair—and we were laughing. Not what I’d imagined, or hoped, this ending. But I am an Ideal Mistress. Ideal Mistresses are understanding, even flippant, in the face of estranged wives returning from conveniently timed sabbaticals. Ideal Mistresses love hot sex and fine single malts. And Ideal Mistresses always like a good laugh.

Stacked around us on the desk were towers of books, in English and Spanish and even Russian, along with piles of notecards containing seedy facts about the Iran-Contra Affair, all waiting to be distilled into Juan Pablo’s magnum opus. I wore his cigarette-smelling shirt over nothing. Juan Pablo wore a wine-colored bathrobe, monogrammed. Fine on him because he looks like a young Jeremy Irons. I bet Jeremy Irons has one just like it.

Our first handbag was the white-sequin and rhinestone clutch, followed by the overwrought tapestry satchel: hand-embroidered peonies and lilies swirling around a complicated jet closure so big it looked fake. We viewed the pink one last. It was a purse: trapezoidal

throwback to the 50s, a patchwork of salmon and fuchsia and coral squares that should not co-exist.

“Who would *carry* that thing?” I knocked back a slug of coffee. “Even as a joke?”

“*Medio pelo,*” Juan Pablo assented. “*Qué mierda.*”

I’ve always loved that ‘tacky’ in Argentinian Spanish translates as ‘half a hair’. Warm and familiar, Juan Pablo’s left hand—the right one was working the mouse—slid up the inside of my thigh, just as though we didn’t have to lay low for a while. Just as though I wouldn’t have to wait for *him* to call *me*, without knowing when that might be. Or if.

I let him tongue-kiss me good-bye without asking. Ideal Mistresses don’t ask questions.

Now it’s freezing, spitting flecks of snow that are starting to stick to the sidewalk. As I run across 5th Avenue toward the subway, an icy blast of wind sends my garment bag flapping into the midmorning traffic. The cheap metal coat-hanger cuts into my wrist. My catering tuxedo. Unlike a real tuxedo, you can wash a catering tux at your local laundromat. You don’t have to iron it, and there’s some sort of coating so melted cheese and tomato sauce don’t stick. My bow tie is fake too, a cater-waiter special—slick imitation satin on an adjustable strap that slips under the imitation wing-tip collar of your cater-waiter shirt and hooks beneath the bow.

I’m late for the second of my three catering engagements for the day—a ‘triple,’ in cater-waiter parlance. It’s what we do, seven days a week if we can, from mid-November through New Year’s, because after New Year’s there’s nothing until weddings in March.

Once we'd made fun of the handbags, Juan Pablo went to Ask Jeeves and typed Monica's name into the search box. The screen filled with candid-camera shots, each more awful than the last. The Real Monica crossing the street, going for incognito in sweats and a baseball cap; a close-up of The Real Monica's fat ass getting into a taxi. The Blue Dress was there too (*sans* Monica); Juan Pablo clicked to enlarge the image, so we could examine what looked like a white blotch on the skirt. "The stain," he announced, his tone ominous.

"Out, out damned spot!," I cried, in a fake-y British accent. Ideal Mistresses are carefree; we live in the moment.

There was a website dedicated exclusively to Monica jokes. One had her asking God to please get rid of her love handles, upon which her ears immediately fell off. Juan Pablo's hand still nestled between my legs, my fingers traced the handle of the desk drawer where he hid the framed photo of Lucía the Cheater, face down.

After we had sex again, Juan Pablo disappeared into the bathroom. As soon as I heard the hiss of the shower, I opened the drawer and turned Lucía over. Lucía the Cheater, soon to be no longer estranged, was blonde in that particularly Argentinian way—hair the color of ripe wheat, green-flecked hazel eyes, honeyed skin. She met the camera's gaze with a tic of amusement cocking up the corner of her mouth, a woman with urgent intellectual matters to attend to: articles to draft, conferences to address, feminist writers dressed in black to interview, colleagues in Latin American Studies to screw.

Juan Pablo told me last Tuesday, "She wants us to try." We were sitting on our usual stools at the whiskey bar on Lex. His eyes were sad and sincere while his finger dug at a deep

scratch in the wood on the bar between us, as though he wanted to deepen it. “She thinks we can save our marriage.”

Since I am an Ideal Mistress, I didn’t tell him I’d hoped he’d leave her (which, as an Ideal Mistress, I shouldn’t have hoped anyway—Ideal Mistresses *like* being the mistress), or that he sounded like the advice columns in the magazines my grandmother used to read in the beauty parlor.

In Juan Pablo’s worldview, a wife fucking the department chair in New Haven on Tuesdays and Thursdays is a pardonable offense, but being a cater-waiter and a terminal ABD is not. ABD means “All But Dissertation.” Not that anyone seems to care, but my area of specialization is Golden Age Spanish Literature, and the central subject of my unfinished dissertation is feminine agency in Fernando de Rojas’ classic sixteenth-century *tragicomedia*, “*La Celestina*.” Celestina is an old lady pimp—academia prefers the more genteel “go-between”—who helps men get into the good graces, and then the private chambers, of off-limits women: virginal, married, engaged, nuns, nuns-to-be, that sort of thing.

Men have never needed a Celestina to gain access to me. Getting into my pants, not to mention my private chambers, is stupidly easy: just speak Spanish. And be married.

I exit at the Hunter College subway stop and head toward Park along 68th Street. Far too soon for my taste, the building known to cater waiters as “The Mausoleum of Pratt” looms into view. An imposing turn-of-the-century mansion with a white-columned facade, it originally belonged to an oil baron by the name of Harold Irving Pratt. There’s a life-sized portrait of Mr. Pratt in the downstairs parlor. He looks exactly like you’d expect him to.

At the service entrance, I press the bell. Someone buzzes me in. On my first day I went in through the front door by mistake. I felt like I'd stumbled into an episode of *Upstairs, Downstairs*.

The Mausoleum of Pratt now houses a think-tank known as the Council on Foreign Relations—guys like Pratt always think they should run the world. Juan Pablo is paid to think here. Soon, I will see Juan Pablo. Worse than that, I will serve him, twice: once at lunch, and then again at the Mausoleum's holiday cocktail party.

Most cater-waiters hate working at the Mausoleum of Pratt because they pay crap, but until last Tuesday, I didn't mind—I've served some pretty interesting people here. Like Fidel Castro. Not only was Fidel polite but, despite the legendary beard, he was a surprisingly clean eater. Henry Kissinger is far, far messier.

And the Mausoleum has been convenient for Juan Pablo and me. Soon after the night he first bought me a drink at the whiskey bar on Lex, we began to make creative use of the small windows of free time between my shifts and his conferences. Once, for instance, Juan Pablo pulled me into his office following a dinner in honor of the widow of Yitzhak Rabin and I gave him a desk-top special. I know, just like Monica, though she was under the desk.

I walk through the gate and across a sort of utility patio, past some trash cans. This is the only place on the premises where you can smoke. Until last Tuesday, if I saw Juan Pablo heading for the service door, I'd grab my pack of Camel Lights and saunter out. I don't know if Lucía the Cheater smokes, but if she does, I doubt she ever does it standing beside a bunch of trash cans.

Once I even caught myself leaning against one of them—an empty one, but still. I righted my posture before Juan Pablo saw me.

“There she is, Miss *Gorgeous* Thing Herself!” Michael, my co-captain, bustles into the pantry. That’s what we call the serving kitchen, a holdover from Pratt mansion days; the cooking kitchen is downstairs.

Michael is already wearing his tux pants and shirt. He leaves the jacket for the last minute, hanging on a padded hanger down in the changing room (which is also the boiler room). Michael’s wing-tips are real; so are his bow-ties. He ties them himself without needing to look in a mirror.

He tousles my hair, damp from melting snow, not yet piled into the towering bun I wear for service. My hair reels them in every time, even the gay ones. I can legitimately complain about a lot of things—my crappy apartment, for example, or my crappy taste in men—but not my hair.

“Pray for some vegetarians—we’re short seven filet mignons.” Michael is folding a snowy pile of napkins, one by one, into the intricate configuration known as the Bird-of-Paradise. “Thirteen more guests than they told us. And we had two no-shows. I had to put Scottie and one of the actresses on bar.” Michael rolls his eyes.

The actresses all come with the same drawback: they disappear every fifteen minutes, downstairs to the phone in the kitchen to check for messages from their agents, or snort cocaine. But it’s the holidays, and all the good cater-waiters have better-tipping places to be. I peer

through the porthole in the swinging door. The guests are crowded four deep in front of the bar, behind which Scottie labors alone.

Without trying I spot Juan Pablo in jeans and a white shirt with ruffles, drinking whiskey. On another man the shirt would look ridiculous, but on Juan Pablo the ruffles become something my fingertips ache to explore. Little jabs of desire dart from the lower portion of my stomach up through my chest and also downward.

The desire makes me furious. Actually, first the desire humiliates me, and nothing infuriates me like being humiliated. I hate Juan Pablo for the lock of straight, black hair that falls into his eyes. I hate him for not pushing it back. My fingers want to do it for him, and I hate him for that too.

“Don’t look, honey,” Michael says. “Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

I continue to look. I can’t help it.

Juan Pablo is engaged in animated conversation with a portly man whose back is to me. His perfectly round head is too small for his broad frame, and there’s something familiar about the way his cottony white hair springs bouncily from its side part. Juan Pablo reaches for the man’s empty glass, raising one eyebrow. He’s done that to me a hundred times. That’s *my* eyebrow, and I hate him for raising it in the portly man’s direction.

Juan Pablo approaches the bar and waits while drinks are inexpertly poured by Scottie. He returns, offers one to the man.

Glasses in hand, they stand near the cheerily crackling fire. Juan Pablo—I hate him for this, too—slouches against the wall, the sole of his Doc Marten planted smack onto the imported French wallpaper. My mouth waters, wanting him. I can see the portly man’s face now, flat as a pie-pan, with the features all crowded together in the middle, like someone put them there for a second and then forgot to come back and arrange them properly.

“Holy shit.” I press my face closer to the porthole.

Beside me, Michael sees it too: Juan Pablo is conversing with Newt Gingrich.

Juan Pablo’s plan is crystal clear to me. And really smart: Invite Newt to the Mausoleum of Pratt. Help him drink too much—his guard will be down; he’s riding high on the opening of the Clinton impeachment hearings—and then put the crazy shit he says into the Juan Pablo magnum opus.

I hate Juan Pablo for being so fucking smart.

I feel the ground drop from under me, and my feet begin to float. This simultaneous sensation of flying and sinking warns me that I am about to do something terrible.

“I’ll get the bread.” I grab the tasteful beige box from *Rachel’s Bounty* and head into the empty dining room. On the table is the Bernaudaud “Flamant Rose” china, each piece adorned with its very own pink flamingo. We’ll have to hand-dry every goddamned plate. I open the bread-box lid and my heart soars: today is a 7-Grain Roll day.

When I reach Newt's place, I pause. I slip my finger into my nose and dislodge a sizeable mass from the nostril wall. I'm well-supplied—cater waiters have lots of colds. I center his roll on his pink flamingo bread plate. *Eight* grains for Newt.

Back in the pantry, I'm positively giddy, picturing Newt's roll waiting for his mouth. This distracts me from the hating/desiring of Juan Pablo.

A bell rings. The chef has sent something up on the dumbwaiter. I slide open the door, salads. "I'll get these!"

My luck can't hold out much longer, someone's bound to come into the dining room for something, so I begin at Newt's place. Using the suction power of my cheeks—Juan Pablo's going to miss this—I summon a little pool of saliva to the center of my tongue and dribble it over the salad that is now Newt's. I toss the tender green leaves with my fingers, including the one that was just up my nose, and hurry down to the boiler room to suit up.

As Michael and I herd the cater waiters into formation around the dining room, I realize it's been at least ten minutes since I've thought about Juan Pablo. But now he's walking in with Newt, brows furrowed, gesturing with his hands in that circular way he has. Immediately behind them is a woman with a helmet of platinum blonde hair. She's in pink, head to toe—suit, blouse, corsage, gloves, pillbox hat, lipstick, even pumps. And a purse.

Behold: with the purse comes the answer to the conundrum I posed earlier. Who would carry Monica's pink "handbag"? Callista. She has it hanging over her arm, just how purses like that were meant to be carried. She minces like June Cleaver on her way to a bridge party.

I avoid the conciliatory look Juan Pablo attempts to land in my eyes as he and Newt settle themselves into the two chairs immediately in front of me. Callista carrying Monica's purse almost distracts me from the fact that Juan Pablo is now close enough for me to bend forward, if I wanted to, and weave my fingers into the swirl of fine black hairs at the nape of his neck—that drove him crazy. Instead, I pour wine, twirling the bottle like the pro that I am.

I'll admit to having enjoyed the obvious discomfort my entanglement with Juan Pablo provoked among some of the Upstairs crowd for the almost-four months of its duration, but as I make my way around the table I'm reaping what I've sown, in the form of amused glances and whispers that I do not believe to be the hallucinations of a paranoiac. I'm beginning to understand how Monica felt, walking around the West Wing doing whatever White House interns do, during the immediate fallout of her under-the-desk escapade.

While Newt gives his speech (which we can't hear, the walls are sound-proofed), we dry the goddamned flamingo china and add up how many drinks Newt consumed. Then we critique Callista's ensemble. The suit was Very Valentino, on the lower end of really expensive but *trés* tacky. The gloves were Coach, also expensive and also tacky. We can't identify the pumps—her feet were under the table most of the time—but the pillbox hat was crushed velvet, Oscar de la Renta.

“Who does she think she *is*?” Scottie squeals, waving a linen tea-towel. “Jackallista Onassis!?”

Oscar de la Renta, says Michael, is the ultimate in tacky.

A spattering of applause reaches us through the soundproofing, then a gush of motion and voices as the guests file out, toward the street and the cold. And still we dry: they used a lot of goddamned flamingo china.

As I produce my *pièce-de-résistance* for the group—Monica’s purse, carried by Callista—I see him, through the window above the sink that looks out onto the corner, Park and 68th. Juan Pablo takes the final drag from a cigarette, tilting his head back and up like he does, blowing the smoke out like a sigh. I think he’s waiting to cross the street, but when the light changes from red to green he doesn’t move. Then his face opens, suddenly tender—I almost don’t recognize him. A woman, wheat-colored hair flying behind her like a flag, comes hurrying across the square of winter cityscape framed by the window. Lucía the Cheater is slighter than I’d imagined, dressed in a smart walking coat, dark tights, pumps with chunky heels. Professor clothes. Juan Pablo bends down and touches his lips to hers in a slow, sweet kiss.

It dawns on me that fucking me was Juan Pablo’s way of getting even with Lucía the Cheater, nothing more. He won’t be calling—not tomorrow, not next week, not ever. Another realization, a slate flagstone heavy in my chest: tonight I’ll be serving Juan Pablo *and* Lucía the Cheater, the ultimate Upstairs-Downstairs moment.

Now that I’ve thrown it into the ring, the pink purse has to be duly ridiculed, along with Monica. Scottie edits a Tom Jones song into something pretty ingenious, especially for him—“She’s got style, she’s got grace, she takes cum-shots in the face, she’s a lady!”

I would like to find this funny, but I don’t. I polish a handful of dessert forks, hard.

Suddenly I understand: for Callista, the purse *was* a joke, a mean, offhand one. A way of saying to the world that girls like Monica and me will never win. It's the Callistas and the Hillarys and the Lucías, even if they cheat, who are left standing by their men when the smoke clears. They might fall in love, as we do, but they choose carefully, play smart and laugh last. They're the Upstairs women.

There were jokes about Callista on the internet, too—I saw them with Juan Pablo—about her giving Newt blow-jobs in his car under some bridge in Washington. But they were on leftie political sites, so you had to take them with a grain or two of salt. And now that I've seen her up close, I can tell you, Callista would never give a blow-job in a car. Monica and I are the ones who do that. We even swallow. And we still lose.

Once we're done drying the silver and the goddamned flamingo plates are put away, the cater-waiters head down to the boiler room to change back into their street clothes. We have an hour before set-up for the holiday cocktail, an hour to pretend we're normal human beings. But Michael and I stay, we've learned that an hour isn't worth it. We don't even bother to change out of our fake tuxes.

In the dining room we place sprigs of holly and candles along the L-shaped buffet table. I try to lift my spirits by telling Michael about Newt's roll and salad.

"Honey, you just prolonged that man's life by a decade!" Michael looks at me with mild exasperation from behind an exuberant arrangement of poinsettias, smiling plastic reindeer, and glitter-dipped pinecones. "He must go to ten catered functions a week. You add up the boogers

and wads of spit and he's got the immune system of a kindergarten teacher." He looks at his watch. "I'd better get upstairs."

"What's going on upstairs?"

"The Investment-Firm-Plus-Art-Gallery Holiday Extravaganza. Didn't you see all the commotion out by the loading zone? The Mausoleum of Pratt has started pimping out the ballroom." He flicks at the starched white front of his shirt. "Why do people dip pinecones in glitter?"

"Michael, switch with me. Please."

"Girl, it'll be ugly up there. Bad art, bitchy celebrities, drunken investment bankers hitting on interns. Way easier down here."

"Juan Pablo will be down here." I can't bring myself to mention Lucía the Cheater. The kiss is waiting in my head—slow motion, Technicolor detail. I tighten the focus on the ridiculously grinning reindeer, banishing the kiss to the dark, crowded corner of Things Never To Be Thought About.

"Oh, God, sweetie!" Michael smacks his forehead with the heel of his hand, sprinkling both of us with glitter. "Could I *be* any thicker? Consider us switched." He gives me a hug, brushes the glitter from my cheeks. "I'll poison his scotch if you want. The usual."

I climb the stairs to the second floor, open the ballroom door and step into chaos. Girls in short black dresses and stilettos teeter atop dangerous-looking stacks of chairs, draping pine boughs into swags and pinning them in place with oversized red bows. A worried-looking

woman in a silver sequined dress and heavy black-framed glasses inspects a series of enormous rectangular tanks, in which are suspended slices of cow.

As in, the whole cow, with its black and white spots and sweet cow eyes and milk-able udders on one side, and on the other, a perfect slice of cow insides, like a drawing in a textbook on bovine anatomy. Under the worried woman's supervision, attendants in black move the tanks of cow into configurations that look random to me but appear to make sense to her. The artist's name is stenciled in stern black letters onto a sign affixed to the Edwardian-period door.

“Damian Hirst. Cows in Formaldehyde.”

Before I can look too long or too hard at the cows, a petite, dark-haired woman is at my side. “You're late.” “*Carolyn*” is embroidered onto her white chef's jacket, inside the logo of a trendy SoHo restaurant. She too is wearing ostentatiously interesting glasses. “I'm glad they found me a girl.”

She squeezes my upper arm, guiding me between the cow slices to a make-shift dressing room in an alcove behind the ballroom. “You won't need your tux.” She indicates a rack of very short black dresses, a pile of high-heeled black shoes. “Hair slicked back, tight bun, nape of the neck—there's some hair gel on the table. Red lipstick. I have some if you forgot yours. Try not to get the dress too dirty.”

Carolyn explains that the gallery owner wants us to look like the sylphy models that strut around a desperately virile Robert Plant in the music video to “Addicted to Love.” We're meant to stand absolutely still, aping mannequins, our faces expressionless while the guests serve themselves from our trays.

I put on a dress and jam my feet into a pair of black suede platforms—cater waiters know that platforms, even very high ones, are better for your feet than heels. And they don't give you spider veins.

In the small upstairs pantry, I begin twining poinsettia blossoms and holly sprigs into Christmas-y garnishes. “What are we serving?”

“Just beef sashimi.” Carolyn hands me a stack of *hors d'oeuvre* trays. “Celebrities don't eat carbs.”

The guests pack themselves tightly between the cow slices. Not far from where I stand, gazing stonily ahead and holding my tray at chest level, I catch sight of David Bowie's hollow-cheeked face. Beside him is Iman, in a crimson satin sheath. She carries a black velvet clutch, with a cameo closure. Now *that* is a handbag.

David Bowie and Iman smile and nod at a fake mannequin as they take champagne flutes from her tray. I make note: they are nice celebrities. Cater waiters exchange this sort of trivia during our many idle moments.

Emerging from behind the slice of cow nearest the door I see a chesty brunette with big hair. She laughs at something a tall, horsy woman has said. For a second the brunette looks like Monica Lewinsky—in fuck-you blue; I swallow my smile at the ballsy color choice—and then I remember how exhausted I am.

And because I'm so exhausted I am unable to keep my sense of humor when a grinning Wall Street boy takes a piece of beef sashimi from my tray and dangles it in front of my face.

He's ruddy-cheeked, the collar of his pin-striped shirt too tight around his neck. When his pudgy thumb and forefinger press into the rare meat, it bleeds juice. I move back involuntarily.

"She's real after all." I smell whiskey on his breath. "Guess she doesn't like meat." He turns to a tall, dark man beside him. "You guys say *carne*, right?"

"*Sí. Carne.*" The dark man's tongue loops over the "r" with an accent I recognize as Argentinian. This one is my type. And he's wearing a wedding ring.

The Argentinian steps forward. "She looks hungry." He peers into my eyes, smiling an intimate little smile, his face so close I can see the shadow of returning beard along his jawline. "She's just a bit shy." His left eyelid droops lower than the right one. He looks like a rich pirate.

Suddenly the fat one's hand is shoving the raw beef into my mouth. The champagne flutes wobble and clink on my tray. I steady them and I chew—the response is automatic.

"Is it good?" Something about the way the dark one draws out the double "o's" and cuts the "d" off a little sharply, like a "t," reminds me of Juan Pablo's voice, murmuring into my hair as he moved inside me.

Now I am real.

"Yeah, it's good." I push the meat to the side of my mouth with my tongue, so I can talk. "So good I'd like you to have some, too."

While he inspects the offerings on my tray, I resume chewing. The flying, sinking sensation overtakes me. The meat is almost ready to swallow. I gather the moist mass to the

center of my tongue and shoot it out of my mouth. It lands, *thwap*, on the Argentinian's cheek, in the corner of his smile, and slides sluggishly downward, finally dropping inside his collar.

I am ridiculously pleased.

They're stunned, not angry, not yet. I empty my tray of beef sashimi and flutes of Veuve Cliquot onto their shiny shoes and push my way through the crowd.

The empty restroom smells of holiday potpourri. I sit on the vanity and rest my forehead against the white marble wall. It's cool, smooth. I close my eyes.

And then I hear the discreet swoosh of an expensive door opening.

"I liked what you did." I don't know it's Monica until I open my eyes—you never hear her voice. She *is* in fuck-you blue. "They had it coming." She's pretty up close, but normal. Soft grey eyes, a little too much gum in the smile. "Must've felt good."

"It did." If I were feeling like myself, I'd ask her how big Bill's penis is, but I'm not. "And now I have to hide in a stall until they all leave."

"No you don't." Monica places a black patent-leather briefcase on the vanity. She wets a fingertip with her tongue, leans toward the mirror and rubs at a spot of mascara beneath her right eye. "They're drunk off their butts. They won't have any idea which one you are—it's a madhouse out there. You guys all look alike, right?" She finds my eyes in the mirror. "Like in the Robert Plant video?"

Monica is that friend everyone has from high school, the one who wins Miss Congeniality at the prom because she's so nice, always and to everyone.

“Just fix your lipstick.” She gives me a Miss Congeniality smile. “You’ll be fine.”

“Mine’s at home. This is the caterer’s.” I point to the Lancôme *Rouge Absolu* smeared beyond the confines of my lips.

Monica opens her black velvet clutch. “Here, use mine.” She pulls the top off and examines the lipstick under the muted ladies’ room lighting. “It’s pretty red.” She puts her handbag down on top of her briefcase.

I’m so tired I don’t even think it’s weird that I’m talking to Monica Lewinsky and using her lipstick in the bathroom at the Mausoleum of Pratt, with sliced cows suspended in formaldehyde lined up right outside the door. Leaning in toward the mirror, I begin to draw my mouth back on. From this position, I see the briefcase from above, the black velvet clutch, its cameo closure. Her eyes follow mine, still in the mirror.

“Did you...I saw Iman’s bag—it’s beautiful. Is that one of yours?”

“I gave it to her. I heard she was going to be here.” Monica retouches her lipstick with the same tube I just used. “She’s my idol. I couldn’t get that skinny if I didn’t eat for a year.” She shrugs and smacks her lips together, like she’s not really that bothered, then blots her lipstick with a Kleenex, like my mother used to do.

I’m still looking at the black velvet clutch, the way the folds catch the light and hold it, the warm beige and terra cotta of the cameo. “That one’s not on your website.”

“Nope.” I hear Midwestern, maybe Michigan. “It’s from the exclusive line. I sew them myself. And I don’t sell them. I give them away, and only to very particular people.”

Monica moves the clutch to the vanity and opens her briefcase. “Here, this one looks like you.”

Forest green jacquard, a compact rectangular envelope—simple, elegant, slightly asymmetrical. It closes with a silk knot and tassel, also forest green.

“Perfect with your hair. I bet you have amazing hair.” Monica checks the effect of her lipstick in the mirror, “once you get that gummy junk out of it.”

I take the bag in my hands and explore the patterned silk with my fingers. It occurs to me that she might not have many friends, anymore.

And then I hear myself asking Monica Lewinsky if she wants to have a drink with me sometime.

“Love to!” She hands me her card—her name and contact information in flowery cursive, a miniature hand-bag printed in the corner. “They want me to sign autographs. I’d better get back out there. Call me.” Then she’s gone, through the whooshing door.

I wait a minute or two before venturing out. In the ballroom, Monica is autographing, smiling. Selling handbags—not from the exclusive line—and posing for photographers between slices of cow. Maybe the party planner *told* her to wear blue.

Carolyn is standing in the far corner with the Argentinian pirate and his pudgy friend. Hands on hips, she scans the room while a short-skirted fake mannequin scrubs at the man’s stained lapel with a napkin, presumably soaked in club soda (a classic cater-waiter trick). I duck behind the screen into the ersatz changing room, but I do not change. I pull keys and money from

my backpack and secure them, together with Monica's card, inside the green jacquard clutch. My cater-waiter tux is on the floor beside the pile of backpacks. I leave it there.

In the black dress and shoes—no longer Carolyn's—I make my way to the front of the ballroom, thankful for the camouflage offered by the drunk, rowdy crowd. I hide behind the coat-rack, choosing, finally settling on a black shearling—fitted, floor-length, with faux fur collar and cuffs. Slipping my arms into the sleeves, I hurry down the stairs.

I leave the Mausoleum of Pratt through the front door.

Outside on 68th Street, dark has fallen. Pillowed mounds of snow hug the bases of wreath-bedecked streetlights. There's a cigarette butt on the sidewalk. Marlboro Reds, Juan Pablo's brand. I see now where I'm standing.

The kiss has ambushed me.

I try to summon the hate but it's gone. In its place a sharp stab, hard like slate, like a broken rib against my breath of frigid air. The traffic blurs as I blink away the sting in my eyes. Even when discarded, Ideal Mistresses don't cry.