

## To Lego or Not

Carrie chose the bright blue bra from her lingerie drawer and then the matching panties—a set Cliff had given her when their relationship was new. She knew the blue bra strap would be visible through her crocheted white top but that was the whole idea of flirty underwear, wasn't it?

Cliff's wife didn't wear pretty lingerie; she wore old-lady-white underpants. That's what Cliff called them. Carrie secretly wondered if his wife might wear sexy underthings if he would surprise her with such a gift, but she wasn't about to suggest it.

Freshly showered and seductively scented, Carrie was a fit but sturdy redhead who wore her hair short and curly. She returned to the kitchen where the aroma of vegetables roasting in the oven suggested she might open the bottle of good pinot noir even before Cliff arrived. But what if he brought a bottle? Would he be disappointed that she had begun their evening without him? Ah, well—Cliff was a big boy. There was that lovely pop as she pulled the cork from the bottle, then poured just a little into her glass. She was only making sure it would be right with the salmon.

The table looked beautiful—the plates were dark red Fiestaware, almost burgundy. The salmon would look so pretty on these plates, as would the vegetables. Some men could care less about a table setting, but Carrie had discovered Cliff respected her talent for food prep and presentation. It was how she made her living—a much less hectic way of life than that of chef in one of the fanciest restaurants downtown, which is what she had been doing when she met Cliff. Tonight marked the one year anniversary of their first “date.”

Being head chef at Narcissus paid well, but it was an emotional roller coaster and it also meant she worked late into the evening and was exhausted when she left the restaurant. So Cliff encouraged her to start her own business—a food blog. He even bankrolled her startup; they both called it an “investment,” that also made it possible for their relationship to bloom and flourish.

Carrie moved the bowl of orange tulips just a skosh. That was one of the idiosyncrasies of dating a married man—in her case, at least. She really had to provide her own flowers. What if he ran into someone he knew at the flower shop? Or heading down the street to her place with

flowers in hand? Without the flowers, he could make up any sort of story, but with flowers—that made it awkward.

It was okay, she enjoyed picking out her own flowers and had bunches throughout the apartment.

“I like coming here with flowers everywhere,” Cliff told her. “So much nicer than stepping over Legos in every room.”

Of course there were Legos all over his house; every time Cliff went on a trip he brought back a new set. Even when the “conference” was actually a romantic rendezvous with Carrie, they made the mandatory stop in the airport gift shop to purchase Legos. It seemed all three of his kids—two boys and a girl—loved building things and were creative geniuses.

The salmon was good—lightly crusted with Dijon mustard and then baked for just twelve minutes. It was the perfect dish for those rare occasions when Cliff could come for dinner because she just popped it in the oven whenever he arrived. So they had it often, but Cliff didn’t seem to mind.

And no dessert. One didn’t want to be stuffed when sex was on the agenda. Just the rest of the bottle of wine after they had cleared the table. Cliff always helped; Carrie felt it was his way of “playing house.” She wondered—and even asked—“Do you clear the table at home?”

“No, it’s one of the chores we’ve given the kids. I used to, but now the two older ones take the dishes to the kitchen. It’s good for them to learn some responsibility.”

They settled on her couch with half-full glasses of the pinot noir. “Good choice,” Cliff commented. “One of your many talents.”

“It’s part of my job,” she pointed out.

He set down his glass and leaned over to kiss her lightly. Her top slid off one shoulder and he reached for the bra strap. “Good color on you.” He pulled that nearly naked shoulder toward him.

Carrie put her glass down and kissed him back. She liked that he appreciated the way she dressed, her deliberately provocative way of tempting him. Not that he needed tempting. And the sex was always good.

“Where are you supposed to be tonight?” Carrie asked as he eased himself out of her bed afterward.

“Dinner with Jacobs,” Cliff replied, naming a client.

He was gone by 9:30.

Which didn't bother Carrie at all. Another woman might have cried herself to sleep when her lover left to go home to his wife. But Carrie turned on the TV to catch up on “Dancing With the Stars”—which Cliff would have deemed silly. Maybe she just liked having her place to herself.

Her cell phone jangled on her bedside table a little after midnight. “CLIFF” it said.

“She's gone.” Carrie scarcely recognized his distraught voice.

“Who's gone?”

“Sandy. My wife, Sandy. She's left me.”

“Just now?”

“Yes. Just now. She was waiting for me when I got home and wanted to know where I'd been.”

“Didn't you tell her you had a meeting with whatshisname—Jacobs?”

“I did. But apparently Jacobs called here looking for me while I was supposedly with him.”

“Oh, Cliff.” Carrie really thought he was smarter than that—would have considered all the possibilities when making up an alibi.

“We had a terrible fight. She was really angry. I thought she was gonna throw something at me.”

“But she didn't?”

“No. She kept crying and making me answer all these questions and not even giving me a chance to answer.”

“What would you have said?” Carrie plumped up a pillow in back of her against the headboard.

“Oh, I don't know, something. But I didn't even have time to think of anything. She... she had a suitcase all packed and just walked out the door. I couldn't believe it.”

“What did you think she would do when she found out?”

Silence.

“Cliff?”

“I guess I didn’t think she would find out.”

Right. And the moon is made of green cheese.

“Where are the kids?” Carrie asked, trying to picture the scene.

“Oh, they’re upstairs. Asleep, I think. It was a very quiet, very intense argument. A lot of hissing. I could tell Sandy didn’t want to wake them.”

“Well, that’s good, at least.”

“Yeah, so they’re good. But I’m not so good. This has been quite a shock.”

“I can imagine,” Carrie sympathized.

“So, could you come over?”

She wasn’t sure she heard him correctly—shifted the phone to her other ear.

“What?”

“Could you come over? Help me figure out what to do?”

“Cliff…”

“You’re always so good at logistics and…”

“That is definitely not a good idea, Cliff.”

“But what am I gonna do? I have to get to the office tomorrow, and the kids have to get to school. Sandy always makes sure they get up and have breakfast, and that’s usually after I’m gone. I have an 8:30 meeting.” He paused to take a breath and sighed. “This is gonna screw up my whole day.”

“Your whole *day*?” Carrie repeated.

“You know what I mean. I have to get a handle on things.”

“Here’s what you’re going to do, Cliff. You’ll call the office first thing and reschedule the 8:30. You’ll get the kids up and tell them their mother’s sister is ill in Buffalo or some such thing and then give them breakfast and get them off to school. Then you’ll call your lawyer. Because, Cliff, your wife is going to come back. She’s not going to leave her kids. She’ll return and then she’s going to tell you to leave and then she’s probably going to file for divorce. So you better have your ducks in a row.”

“When do you think she’ll come back?” Cliff asked.

“I don’t know that, Cliff. It may be tomorrow, it may be next week. Does she have her own credit cards?”

“What if I don’t leave? She can’t make me leave, can she?”

“Is that what you want?” Carrie wondered.

“But where would I go?” She could almost see him grimace. “One of those extended stay places where all the kicked-out husbands go?”

“That wouldn’t be so bad, temporarily.”

“I could come stay with you...”

“No, Cliff. You couldn’t. Not now. Not six months from now. Not ever.”

She hated kicking a guy when he was down, but if Cliff came to live with her it wouldn’t be long before she was wondering where he really was when he told her he was having dinner with a client...or off to a weekend conference.