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## HOW BUSINESS IS HANDLED

by Meagan Elixabeth

The phone rang in its cradle. I put an end to the racket by pressing the cold metal against my ear. “Hello?” The cord twirled around my hand. Springs squeaked when I plopped onto the bed. My legs crossed, skirts shifting to my thighs.

“Cat.” His voice was quiet on the other end. “You made it safe.” Loud enough to be heard over the baby’s wailing. “You didn’t answer your cell.”

“I’m sorry, Tom. It was a long trip. I just got in.” My fingers fixated on the cord. Relentlessly, they tried to straighten out the kinks, but failed each time. “Why is Sophia crying? Did you feed her?”

“Yeah.” A sigh from his end, muffling the speaker. “I just put her to bed.”

“I see.” A soft rapping came from my room’s door. I quickly faked a yawn. “I’m ready for a nap myself. I have a lot to do before the convention.” I freed my hand from the cord’s entanglement. “Tell Sophia goodnight for me, will you?”

“Okay. I love y—”

The phone clicked back into its cradle. I glanced in the mirror, smoothing out my hair and skirts. Before opening the door, I paused. My purse sat on the dresser, stitched with my initials “C.S.” in pink. I removed my wedding band and tossed it inside.

A tall man greeted me. “Catrina,” he said. “A pleasure to finally meet you.” He offered me a slender bottle, filled with a dark red.

“Thank you, Andrew.” I smiled, showing no teeth. “Please, come in.” I peeked down the hall before closing the door behind him. Empty, except for the flickering lights. “We can enjoy this on our little patio. I’m afraid I only have plastic.”

“No matter to me.” Andrew removed his business jacket, unbuttoning the cuffs of his dress shirt. When he rolled up his sleeves a piece of tattoo showed on his bicep, near the elbow. A snake?

My hands trembled, fumbling with the cork.

“Allow me.” Andrew’s hands were rough over mine. The cork popped easily.

Liquid washed over my tongue, burning away the trembling in my fingers.

Andrew refilled my cup. “How do you make your living?” He sat across from me with his legs crossed. “I don’t believe I ever asked you in the chatroom.”

“I sell makeup.” I relaxed into my chair. “This is the first time I’ve traveled for work. It’s more of an excuse to get away from home. Business is growing, though. And you?”

“I also run a business.”

My head throbbed, pulsating pain between my temples. I attempted to blink away the fog that gathered in my eyes. As cloudy as my vision became, I could clearly see that Andrew had not touched his wine. His eyes met mine and a chill ran through me. I rose to my feet and stumbled.

Andrew was quick to catch my arm. He dragged me inside, my legs dangling. I was tossed onto the bed, my muscles useless. I tried to scream for help, but my throat constricted. My tongue failed me.

The phone rang.

“You wired the money?”

Through the fog, I could see Andrew pull something from his pocket.

“I can handle my business, Mr. Summers.”

Andrew wrapped a cord around my neck.

END