

MISTRESS ON DEMAND

by

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Lily watched as the sleek black BMW slid to the curb across the street.

It had to be him.

A breeze ruffled the leaves of the trees around the café near Hyde Park. The fall afternoon was cool, but her shiver wasn't caused by the temperature. She brushed a wisp of hair from her cheek before wrapping the pristine white linen napkin around her hand again.

The driver's door opened.

She never should've agreed to this.

A tall, lithe man dressed in a cream colored knit shirt, pressed brown slacks and what had to be expensive Italian loafers stepped out of the car. Sunlight kissed his thick chestnut hair as he scanned the area, before meeting her gaze. Moving with purpose, he crossed the street.

She tightened the napkin around her fingers until their tips turned blue. She consciously released the pressure.

Oh, it's definitely Sterling Grayson. Who else could it be? She'd heard her sister describe her employer - in glowing detail. Over and over.

Once again she'd allowed Rachael to put her in an awkward situation. Whenever her sister begged for help, Lily was compelled to rescue her. Make things better. Why did she always feel she had to help? Protect her? She'd been letting Rachael put her in this kind of situation forever. Lily believed sisters were supposed to be there for each other, yet it seemed she always did more for Rachael, and she in return made excuses when Lily needed help.

When Sterling's executive assistant had arranged this meeting at the café, Lily told the assistant she'd be wearing a red skirt. He stepped to her table and towered over her; giving her a critical once over. Stretching her head back, Lily's looked met his. None of Rachael's reports had mentioned his amazing dove gray eyes.

"You are Rachael's sister." Not a question, but a statement.

Lily nodded.

He sat on the wrought chair next to her. "I understand you wanted to speak to me?"

Rachael wouldn't call Sterling and explain. She said it had to be done in person, and at the last minute Rachael's flight had been changed. That left Lily to keep her appointment.

"Uh...yes. Rachael asked me to let you know she'd be unable to take the position you offered her."

A waiter approached. Sterling placed their order, not asking her preference. "And she sent her timid big sister to tell me."

Lily sat straighter and met his look with a direct one of her own. "It couldn't be helped. She got a call for an acting job she couldn't pass up. She left early this morning."

"She'd committed to attending the benefit with me tonight."

The waiter returned with their tea and a plate of scones.

Lily concentrated on stirring sugar into her cup to avoid staring at his handsome face. "I'm sorry. I wish I could do something to help."

He leaned back in his chair and let his intense gaze sweep over her from head to toe, then said in a thoughtful tone, "Maybe you can."

"How?"

"You can attend in your sister's place. With a little work I think we can make you presentable."

"Excuse me?" Lily's eyes snapped up, and locked with his. She couldn't decide if she was indignant over his demand she go or insulted he thought her appearance needed work. "I'm sorry that my sister left you in a spot but I'm just the messenger here. I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Your sister took my money. By definition that's a contract. Unless you want her to go to jail, you will take her place."

"You paid my sister to date you?" Surprise and disbelief laced her voice.

A sexy grin curved his lips. Lily gulped.

"It's strictly business."

He stood, threw some bills on the table. Taking hold of her wrist, he pulled her to her feet and towards the BMW before she emerged from the fog created by his smile.

"By the way, what's your name?" he asked.

"Lily."

"Lily." He rolled the vowels around his tongue, his accent warming them. "My favorite flower."

He opened the passenger side door of the car and unceremoniously helped her in.

What am I doing?

She'd spent the last few hours having her hair and nails done, before she'd slipped into an elegant sea foam green dress that swam around her long slender legs and dipped indecently low in the back. She complained about the amount of skin showing but the woman named Shea, or was it Shell, said it was perfect. Sterling entered the foyer and the look on his face made her believe that it just might be.

Minutes later she sat in the back seat of a Rolls Royce with Sterling. The chauffeur maneuvered them through the heavy London traffic. Lily glanced at the man next to her. Her breath caught. Dressed in his formal wear Sterling was the most dashing man she'd ever seen.

Lily cleared her throat, gathered her courage and asked, "Please tell me again why I'm here?"

"I paid to have a beautiful woman on my arm."

Her heart skipped.

He turned and leaned closer, studying her. "I didn't know that in this day and age a woman could still blush."

Her face warmed.

Sterling settled into the seat again. "We're attending a charity event I support. Try to enjoy yourself."

At the entrance to the Ritz Hotel, Sterling helped her out of the car. He tucked her arm through his and placed his hand over hers. She wasn't sure if he held her hand to reassure her or because he was afraid she might bolt. She swayed a second on the heels she wasn't use to.

He glanced at her, concern in his eyes that quickly faded before he whispered, "By the way, you are supposed to be my fiancée tonight."

He led her onto the dance floor.

Lily pulled back. "I'm not a good dancer."

"Don't worry. Just follow me," he breathed in her ear causing a ripple of sensation to skim along her spine. Pulling her close, he slipped his large hand around her waist to rest it on the exposed skin of her back. Lily's knees started to buckle. She would have fallen if Sterling hadn't pulled her close. His personal scent mingled with a hint of crisp citrus surrounded her.

His thumb caressed her sensitive skin as he fit her more snugly to him. If there hadn't been so many other dancers on the floor she would've been embarrassed.

They'd circled the floor once and were half way around again when he pressed her closer and stopped. They stood in

front of a willowy brunette in a skin tight, low cut dress and her partner. Animosity radiated from the woman.

Sterling didn't release his intimate hold, but instead pulled her nearer.

Was this striking woman why she was here?

"Well, Sterling I'm surprised to see you," the woman said in a silken voice.

"Rica, your days of keeping track of me are over." He nodded to the older, heavy set man standing next to her.

Rica answering smile didn't reach her eyes. "They are indeed. By the way, Richard and I getting married."

The fingers at Lily's waist shifted. "Congratulations." He turned to the other man and offered his hand. "Good luck. I'm sure your money will make her happy."

Sterling whirled Lily away. His hand slipped lower to generate heat like a hot day across her skin.

They finished the dance and he led her off the floor toward a group of Japanese men. He leaned close and whispered, "Remember, we're engaged."

The men all stood as she and Sterling approached. He guided her around the table to the men with gray at his temples. The two men bowed to each other.

"Mr. Soto, I would like you to meet, Lily." Mr. Soto bowed deeply in front of her. He straightened and studied her with intelligent eyes that she suspected missed little. "Hello, it is nice to meet you. Grayson has told me so much about you."

She glanced covertly at Sterling. He smiled at her as if it were truth while his hand flexed on her waist in warning.

Plastering on her best friendly smile she said, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Soto." Her baby sister wasn't the only actress in the family.

Mr. Soto dipped slightly again. "Grayson, will Lily be joining us at your country estate this weekend? I would like to get to know her better."

"I'm not sure that--"

"Now sweetheart," Sterling interrupted, "I'm sure you can change your plans." He smiled but the ice hard warning in his eyes demanded she play along or else. To Mr. Soto he said, "I'm sure she'll be delighted. I look forward to your visit to my home."

Thankfully someone at the next table called Sterling's name and they moved away. The rest of the surreal evening went by with Lily watching it as if it were a TV show.

She remained at Sterling's side only because he took her hand and refused to let it go even when she made an attempt to pull away. Amazed that her hand fit so comfortably in his large one, she was even more surprised at the sense of security she felt. She'd almost forgotten the feeling. Being responsible for her sister for so many years and having no one to turn to had left her wanting.

As she followed Sterling around the ballroom watching him work the room, she mentally sighed each time he didn't introduce her as his fiancé. She didn't care for deception.

At the door, Sterling gave her hand a squeeze and beamed at her. "You were great. Perfect in fact."

Her heart cart-wheeled, and settled with a thump.

Taking hold of her elbow he guided her towards the waiting car. Inside, Lily scooted as far away from him as the space would allow. The chauffer closed the door and she said, "Mr. Grayson, I will not be forced..."

He held up a hand. "Wait." He spoke quietly but with enough authority she immediately fell silent. Giving the driver an address, he then punched a button raising the glass partition.

At the final click of the glass into place, Lily continued, "How dare you tell Mr. Soto I'll be at your country house? I've

fulfilled my sister's obligation to you. I'm going home tomorrow. I have a job. Responsibilities. Who do you think..."

Quicker than a boxer's right hook, he reached across the area separating them, snaked his arm around her and pulled her hard against his body. His mouth came down.

His lips were firm, warm and molded to hers. Heaven. She'd never been kissed by a man with such skill and confidence.

She took hold of his lapel and hung on for dear life.

His mouth softened, nibbled hers before he lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. "Now that you're quiet, maybe you'll listen to reason. I'm hiring you to spend the weekend at my house. I'll send you home in my private jet Sunday evening and you'll go to work on Monday morning 20,000 pounds wealthier."

Lily pushed him away. "I don't need your money."

A hint of a knowing smile hovered over his gorgeous mouth.

"Everyone can use more money. Having met your flighty sister and spending this evening with you I'm willing to bet you're paying her bills." His voice lowered. "Think of it as an acting job. Pretend you're in love with me this weekend..." His mouth quirked to one side. "From your reaction to my kiss just now you'll be very convincing."

Sterling dropped her at her hotel with instructions to be checked out and waiting in the lobby at eight the next morning. He picked her up and they'd stopped at an exclusive department store well before business hours. Sterling directed the sales associate to select items Lily would need for the weekend, all designer. When she objected he stated she needed to look the part of his fiancée.

"Why are you paying me to act like your fiancée?"

"Mr. Soto is from a very traditional culture. He believes that a married man or soon to be married man has a better head for business. I've been trying for years to work out a deal with him to let my company manufacture a particular plane part. He wouldn't even discuss it with me until he learned I was engaged. Everything changed. In fact, he contacted me."

"You aren't engaged."

"No, but I was. To Rica, the woman you met at the benefit."

"Oh-o-o." Now she understood the look of hostility the woman had slung at her like mud.

"I broke it off. She was only interested in my money. But I'm not going to lose Soto's business over a gold-digger I dumped. So I hired your sister to play the part for me at the benefit."

"But what about this weekend?"

"I had no idea that Soto would expect you to be there. We're supposed to finalize the deal."

They reached Grayson Manor a number of hours later. Sterling's manor was unlike any home Lily had ever experienced. She'd stepped into the life of the rich and famous and she didn't belong. Sterling had personally shown her to a beautiful bedroom and left her to settle in. Did he think of her as some kind of Regency romance heroine? She was starting to see herself as one.

Lily woke and stretched across the largest bed she'd ever slept in. It was also the most luxurious. Today she would again act the part of Sterling's fiancée. The money Sterling was paying her for this weekend would pay off Rachael's acting bills. Lily was determined to do her best to be a believable fiancée.

Dressed in new designer jeans and a pale yellow ruffled blouse, she made her way to the morning room where Sterling was already having breakfast and reading the paper. He looked up and smiled giving her a nod of approval. "You will do."

"Thank you. I think. It's the clothes. They're wonderful."

He stood and motioned to the chair next to his. "No, it's not just the clothes."

A maid appeared with a plated breakfast and sat it before her. The eggs, bacon and pumpkin muffins smelled divine, but Lily's nervous stomach was one big knot.

Sterling returned to his chair. "You'll pretty much be on your own today. Except I'll expect you to be at dinner at eight. I'll come by your room a few minutes before. I may have some last minute instructions. You will spend the evening with me. Tomorrow morning there will be a large group of people coming for brunch. I want you to act as hostess."

"What do you expect your fiancée as hostess to do?"

"Stand next to me and smile, and since you have a beautiful smile you can't go wrong."

Lily warmed under his praise.

"Mr. Soto and his associates should be here at nine. I would like for you to be in the front hall to greet him. You won't be needed again until dinner. We'll be conducting our business meeting in the library but you are free to explore the rest of the Manor and grounds. Ask my staff if you need anything." He stood. "I'll see you at the front door," he checked his watch, "in thirty minutes."

He looked at her. "You have that scared deer in the lanternlights look in those big brown eyes." He ran the back of one finger across her cheek. "You'll be perfect, my Lily. Don't worry."

The fork in her hand rattled against the china plate when she lowered it. She hoped her nerves could stand up to playing out the deception and being so close to Sterling. Her body already hummed like a taut wire in the wind, and it wasn't eight PM yet.

Mr. Soto had been punctual that morning. She'd exchanged greetings with him before Sterling dismissed her with a quick kiss on the mouth and a warm smile. His little nudge down the hall had covered her flustered look. As she walked away he said with convincing intimacy, "I'll see you at dinner, sweetheart."

Lily couldn't understand how her legs had stayed under her. Even now, reliving that moment when Sterling's firm, full lips had met hers briefly, her legs went weak. Sterling's kiss had only been an act but...

If she didn't watch herself she would start believing this was real which could only end in heartache Monday morning.

Sterling's formal gardens were a magnificent array of fall colors and Lily loved it. He obviously demanded nothing less

than perfection in every part of his world. It was a stark reminder that she was only a hired actress, not the perfect fiancée. Lifting her face to the sun, she enjoyed the warmth caused by something other than Sterling's touch.

Steps on the gravel path made her look around. Sterling strolled towards her.

"Has something happened?" she asked.

"No, negotiations are going well. So well in fact, we decided to take a break and resume in the morning."

"I'm glad."

"I couldn't have done it without you. Soto is quite charmed by you. So am I."

She swallowed. He gaze met hers. "Are you?"

Sterling stepped closer. "I find you quite charming, Lily. I can't remember when, if ever, I couldn't concentrate on work. I keep thinking about continuing this."

Pulling her to him, he claimed her mouth.

Shocked, Lily didn't move. He must have taken her compliance as an invitation because his hands slipped around her waist and pulled her against his hard body. He deepened the kiss.

Lily gripped his arms. Her mmmmm of delight elicited a corresponding growl of desire from him. His embrace tightened.

What was she doing? This was getting out of hand. She was only playing a part. She already felt like a puppet and she didn't want to add being his toy to the list.

She shoved him away. "I understand that when Mr. Soto is around we need to act affectionate but off stage you need to keep your hands to yourself. This isn't what you hired me to do."

His scowl helped her understand his success in business. He didn't like being thwarted. "Let's renegotiate the contract."

"No. Our relationship is only a business one and I intend to keep it that way."

He moved away. "If that's the way you want it. Come, I'll show you the rest of the gardens."

That evening, Lily made all the contortionist moves she could without pulling her arm out of its socket trying to finish zipping her dress. When she heard a knock at her door she assumed it was the maid she was expecting. "Come in."

Sterling entered. His tailored black suit fitted him to perfection. If she'd thought him handsome before, he was devastatingly dashing now.

She stood in the middle of the room and stared. He looked delicious enough to eat, like a piece of fine hand-dipped chocolate.

He let out a low chuckle. "You might want to close your mouth now."

Jerked back to reality, her cheeks flamed from embarrassment. "You, look...uh... very nice."

"I could tell you thought so. Thank you. You look lovely yourself."

She'd pulled her hair up so that it fell from the top of her head in ringlets. The rusty-red-chiffon knee length dress flattered her coloring. The only thing out of place was the pesky zipper.

"Thank you." Left with no choice, she asked, "Would you mind doing my zipper?"

His sexy grin made her tingle all the way to her toes.

"No, I don't mind."

Lily slowly turned and presented him her back. The warmth of his breath touched her neck and his masculine scent floated around her. She shivered. He hesitated, and then pulled the zipper up excruciatingly slow. His finger tip left a line of heat along her skin. Cool lips touched the ridge of her shoulder. "All ready now."

She turned to face him, but couldn't meet his eyes.

"Sterling-

"I know. I couldn't help myself. You're irresistible."

No man had ever found her irresistible. She'd always been the other sister. The hard working one. But it was just an act. She refused to be used.

"Just don't let it happen again." She smiled letting her pleasure reach her eyes.

His grin was more devilish than sincere. "I'll try but I make no promises."

Sunday evening arrived before Lily knew it. She was surprised at how comfortable she'd become in Sterling's company in a few short days. He and Mr. Soto had reached their contractual agreement and Sterling had relaxed becoming the perfect companion the evening before.

The house party on Sunday had a festive mood to it. More of Sterling's business associates as well as their wives arrived before noon. Sterling was attentive to her but not overly so. Lily guessed he'd explained their relationship, but then again he was the boss and he could have very well thought it unnecessary. His body hadn't come into contact with hers since

the night before, for which she was grateful, but a part of her admitted she craved his touch.

She had caught him looking at her a number of times with something that she wanted to define as desire, but she didn't believe it. Her eyes were drawn to him whenever he was in the room. The few times, out of hundreds, that he had caught her looking at him, his smile implied there was more between them than a business deal. His intense, smoky gray expression made her believe she was the only person in the room. Her pulse quickened.

Now, after telling Mr. Soto goodbye an hour earlier, she and her bags waited in the main hall. Sterling had insisted on taking her to the airport himself.

She watched him walk to her. Her heart hurt. She was going to miss him. How had he managed to become so important so fast? She wanted the make believe to go on and on.

He stopped when he was close enough that she could feel the heat from his body, but he didn't touch her. Four days ago, she'd have stepped back, but now she was going to soak up every ounce of his warmth and essence before she left. She would never see him again and she would grab every memory she could.

"Lily, I'm sorry but I'm not going to be able to go to the airport. A question came up about the contract. I need to

resolve it right away. Instead, my driver will take you." He handed her a check. "I appreciate your help this weekend."

"You're welcome."

"I wanted us to talk."

"I understand."

He took her in his arms and said softly against her lips, "I don't think you do." He crushed her to him. He conveyed a toe curling craving.

Lily's arms surrounded his neck and met him passion for passion. Kiss for kiss.

Sterling drew away, but didn't release her. His gaze held hers. A steaming moment crawled by before he said huskily, "Come, I'll walk you out."

As she rode away, Lily could hardly make out Sterling's form through the moisture fogging her eyes.

Weeks later Lily had settled into her pre-Sterling life, but she wasn't the same. She made herself walk a different route home so she wouldn't pass the tabloid stand and be tempted to search out information about him.

Arriving home after an especially difficult day, she kicked off her shoes and had dropped onto the couch when the door bell rang.

The bell sounded again. Whoever it was certainly impatient.
Lily opened the door.

Sterling.

"What're you doing here?"

"May I come in?"

Lily stepped out of his way.

He closed the door behind him and moved towards her. Lily backed up until she met the wall.

Sterling flattened a hand against wall beside to her head, and leaned forward. "Why haven't you cashed my check?"

"I haven't had the chance-

"Wrong."

"I don't need it."

He glanced around the room. "Wrong." His gaze came back to hers. He took hold of her chin, and ran his thumb over her bottom lip. "You didn't cash it because of the way you feel about me." His lips met hers.

At last she was home. Belonged. Was the one being cared for.

She wrapped her arms around Sterling's waist and pulled him tight. "Never let me go."

What will Sterling be manufacturing if he gets the contract with Mr. Soto?