

The Girl with the Candy-Apple Smile

Heidi Komarova took one languid bite, and the lobster canapé vanished behind her candy-apple smile. Beyond the window, Manhattan smoldered like white-hot embers adrift in obsidian lava. It was her first time alone with Tyler Hollingsworth. When she looked up at him, he puffed out his chest and licked his lips, brown eyes dark with lust.

“I’m afraid I’ll get bored,” she said. “You’re a little too vanilla for me.”

“What if I had chocolate topping for you to lick off?”

Heidi slid her palm up Tyler’s chest and caught his necktie below the knot. “With sprinkles?”

His eyes sparkled. “Does dandruff count?”

Heidi took a measured sip of wine and looked him over. Her eyes said it all. She thought he was too hot, too ripped to be a real New York analyst. Did she wonder if he could hold her attention for more than one night? Tyler would ensure the answer was yes.

She set her glass on the dining table. “I’ll be right back.”

Tyler watched her slink past the sofa. Platinum hair, thigh-high stilettos, and enough attitude to keep him guessing. She looked like a beauty queen, and he imagined her in a crown and sash, answering his every question with "world peace."

Those appetizer things he'd found in the freezer had impressed her. Refilling their glasses from the box of wine on the hutch, Tyler knew one thing: by the end of the night, Heidi would be on top of him.

Heidi opened the first door she saw and released a growling Chihuahua. "Oops!" she giggled, nearly tripping over the little guy as he raced to Tyler. "He's so cute! What's his name?"

Tyler muttered a curse as the dog latched onto his pant leg. "Dwayne," he said, trying to stay cool. "Bathroom's past the kitchen. Last door before the foyer."

"How do you know I need the bathroom?"

"By the way you're walking."

She arched an eyebrow and disappeared into the washroom.

Tyler looked down at the snarling furball chewing his cuff. He had spent weeks setting up this night; he wasn't about to let a ten-pound psychopath ruin it. Gently, he dragged Dwayne toward the walk-in closet. Halfway there, he tripped, flailed, and knocked over the large, ornate urn between the sofa and wingback chair. It shattered, burying the Chihuahua in a heap of ash.

Tyler sneezed. He felt like he'd just stepped out of a clown car. If Heidi saw this, she'd bolt.

There was no sign of life beneath the pile. Dare he hope? There would be both an upside and a downside to the beast's death.

A plume of ash erupted as Dwayne dug out and latched onto Tyler's other leg. Relief and a small dose of regret tangled in his mind as he swept the mess under the wingback with his free foot.

In the bathroom, Heidi washed her hands and admired her expensive sorority nose, a best-seller among the sisters at Kappa Kappa Delta. The crash hadn't stopped her from opening the mirrored cabinet and inspecting the ten pill bottles inside. "I've never seen a dog who didn't like its owner," she called.

Tyler dragged the growling dog to the living room closet. "He's not mine." He wanted to pull Dwayne off, but what if his tail came off like a lizard's?

"Whose dog is he?" Heidi called from the bathroom.

"He belongs to this guy, Ryan." Tyler put his finger over Dwayne's nose, hoping the dog would let go to breathe. But Dwayne, no fool, simply panted out the sides of his mouth.

"How long do you have him?"

"Not sure," Tyler grunted. Ryan had never said when he was coming back. But there was one thing Tyler knew for certain: Heidi would never allow him in her pants if she caught him wrestling a Chihuahua. He pried the dog's mouth open, shoved the beast into the closet, and slammed the door.

Sacrificing a suit was worth it. He just wished it hadn't been his gray virgin wool single-breasted.

Tyler surveyed the room. Their wine sat forlornly on the dining table, where he had been courting her like a dork at a high school prom. The sofa was more intimate, but moving things now would make him look try-hard. He'd wait. Let her see his thoughtful side when he carried it all over and complimented her hair.

He grabbed the putter leaning behind the sofa. With a practiced tap, he sank a ball into the cup. "Yes!" He admired himself in the mirror as he pumped his fist like a PGA champ.

In the bathroom, Heidi examined a bottle of probiotics. "Tyler's weird," she muttered. "Maybe a nutcase. He probably has a spy cam in here." She froze, eyes scanning the room. "Some people have no respect for privacy." Then she called, "It's so nice of you to dog-sit!"

Tyler slipped off his suit jacket, admiring how his biceps bulged under his crisp shirt. Not quite as tan as those summers hauling groupers off his dad's boat, but close.

Heidi returned a bottle of Gas-X to the cabinet and opened another section. Tampons. Her brow furrowed.

Tyler flexed. No way was he putting that jacket back on and hiding two of his best assets. He'd say he was too warm, when in reality he was smokin' hot. Chuckling, he struck an Atlas pose. He needed to come up with some moves to flex his muscles subtly. Looking at his watch was a good one, but she'd think he wanted her to leave. He practiced swaggering and smirking.

Something was wrong. Was this how Luke Skywalker felt when there was a disturbance in the Force? No, Luke was too boyish. Maybe Han Solo...

And then he saw it, a yellow glob quivering in his left nostril.

He quickly excavated it with his finger.

Heidi emerged.

Tyler shoved the booger hand behind his back.

"I saw the tampons in the bathroom," she said, approaching.

Abort mission! Abort mission! his brain screamed.

"You are so considerate of your guests!" She beamed. "I can't believe you're single!"

"Believe it," he said, heart pounding, booger bouncing.

"What's in your hand?" she asked playfully. "Show me what you've got!"

Sweat bloomed under his arms.

"Come on!" She grabbed his arm. "What is it?"

Tyler panicked. There was only one option. Embrace her. He kissed her neck with the enthusiasm of a man with a booger on the end of his finger.

Heidi moaned with desire.

Under other circumstances, Tyler would have been intoxicated by her soft, smooth skin and her scent, a delicate mixture of jasmine, orange blossom, and amber. But as he nibbled her neck, Heidi kept asking.

After consuming what he calculated to be a teaspoon's worth of makeup, Tyler could think of only one way out. He ran his finger up the center of her back and wiped the booger on her dress.

Heidi squealed with delight.

Tyler kissed her. It was like a velvet caress, her lips soft yet electrifying. He pulled her closer, pressing his body to hers.

"Why aren't you married?" she cooed.

Tyler stiffened. "What would you do if I was?"

She laughed as if it were a silly question. "My dad would kill you... Can you keep a secret?"

"Anything for you."

"I usually go out with married men."

He kissed her neck again, already regretting the small talk. He was here for dessert, not discussion.

“It’s fun breaking up marriages, watching pathetic wives try to win their husbands back.” She giggled. “My dad told me to stop, and of course, I didn’t listen. So he killed one of them.”

Tyler paused. “Wait. Is your father Bogdan Komarov?”

Heidi pouted and traced his nose. “Yes. But don’t worry. You’re single.” She kissed him, fiery and passionate. “You are so hot.”

“No, you are,” he whispered, forgetting everything she’d just said. Could she be the one - the woman who might love him as much as he loved himself? He slid his hands down past her waist and cupped her firm, round...

A click sounded from the front door.

Tyler turned just as the gunshot exploded.

Heidi collapsed on top of him, exactly as he’d predicted. Except she was dead.

A shadow filled the doorway.

“Honey,” the voice growled, “I’m home.”