

Metamorphosis

by Keppiehed

Dress shopping ends without a surprise for Melinda.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Warnings: domestic abuse, violence, language

Prompt: "poppy"

A/N: This was written for week #4 at Brigit's Flame. Thanks very much to Ana for the firstread! A huge debt of gratitude for my editors Toxic_Apiaceae and MermaidBia for their detailed, thorough, line-by-line feedback. Thanks, ladies. Your input was invaluable! Any errors left are my own to claim.

She knew how it would look before she even caught sight of herself in the dressing room mirrors: like all the other dresses before, it would be modest and becoming, fitted but not too revealing.

Boring.

Melinda sighed and smoothed her hand over the pleats at the waistband. She already had at least five dresses just like this at home in her closet, but Jay insisted that she look her best. The rest of her wardrobe had failed her in the past; she was at a loss about how to walk the fine line between looking good and not drawing the attention away from him. It was an impossible position, and one that made her resent every Christmas party and gala attendance since their marriage began.

Well, the soiree was this evening and she had tried on everything that was suitable in the department. It was more of the same. Melinda turned to view her backside and sighed. The black was the appropriate shade and hid her figure flaws. She might not be the most beautiful wife there, but in this dress she wouldn't embarrass Jay, and for that she could be grateful, even if he wasn't. She might as well take it.

As Melinda raised her arms to unzip the back, her eyes caught on a flash of color that was hidden behind her more somber stack. Curious, she lifted the item into view.

It was the kind of dress that she usually walked right by without even giving a second glance. It was made for models—*avant garde* and impractical for any kind of event that she could imagine, still it beckoned to her now. On impulse, she shimmied out of the black one—suddenly lusterless by comparison—and dared to put on this new cocoon. It was a size too small, but she hadn't been eating again, and this sort of style only showcased her boniness to advantage. It was silk, with an asymmetrical hemline and a bold pattern. It was everything that she disdained in clothing, but when it fell into place against her skin, the full serendipity of her discovery became apparent. It fit her perfectly, not too tight, nor too loose as she was wont to wear. It molded to her body, a caress that lent her grace and a hint of sensuality without crossing the taboo into overtly sexual. Melinda was mesmerized by her own image in the mirror. *Who was this woman?* She couldn't recognize herself. For that reason above any other, she took great care with the dress and purchased it post haste.

Melinda had never felt so confident about her appearance before a party, and she was looking forward to an outing she might actually enjoy instead of worrying about how she looked. *This is how it should be*, she thought as she got ready. *This is how most people are. They don't think so much about these little things; they just go out without*

being so neurotic. I am that girl in the mirror. I can be her. Look at her. I am elegant. I am strong.

She'd just stepped into her high-heels, the very last touch on her outfit, when Jay's key sounded in the door. *That was close!* Her heart beat faster. She should have known from last time not to have cut the timing so short.

"Ready, babe? It starts at—" he stopped mid-sentence and started to laugh. "What the hell is that?"

"What?" Melinda's stomach dropped. *He didn't like it*

"Don't give me this shit. I work all day, and is it too much to ask that when I come to take you out to a nice party that you pick out a decent goddamned outfit? What, do I have to dress you, too? Can't you do anything for yourself?" His voice was rising. "Did I say wear something with roses all over it? Huh? Did I?"

"They're poppies," she said quietly. She wasn't going to cry. She wasn't.

"Do I look like a fucking florist to you? We are going to a charity auction, Melinda, not a circus. Jesus, you look like a clown. You are not going to embarrass me in front of everyone in that thing. I hope you saved the tags. Now go get your ass in there and change. Now."

Melinda tried to stop the chattering of her teeth. "No." She couldn't look at him, but something steeled inside, a little wire of resolve held firm. She wasn't going to change, not this time. Not for him. *She was that girl in the mirror, that really was her. She could do this.*

Jay had turned towards the kitchen, and that small word hung in the silence, stretching out between them. He didn't turn around. "What did you say to me?"

"I said no. I like this dress. It's fine. I picked it out, and it's good for tonight. Let's just go." Melinda tried for light and breezy, but she knew she was pleading. She hated that she was already begging, and it hadn't even started yet.

Jay sighed. "Why do you make me do this? Why? I don't want to hurt you, but you're such a stupid bitch sometimes when you say things like that. Things that you know will make me mad."

The rest happened in slow motion. Melinda didn't try and run; but after a while, she knew it didn't matter which dress she wore, because they wouldn't be going to any parties tonight, or for a long time after.

When it was over, and she was in a heap on the floor and Jay was lying next to her, panting, she cracked an eye to view the damage. All she could see was the red of her blood seeping into the white silk, staining over the pattern of poppies and spoiling it forever. She wondered just then if it was possible to come out of a cocoon not a butterfly, but a bitter and broken thing instead. Perhaps the caterpillar might have been better to have never dreamed of beauty in the first place.

"Did you learn your lesson, babydoll? Are you going to go take that off like a good girl?" Jay sat up from the floor, flexing his hands. "Damn. I think that's going to bruise in the morning."

Melinda nodded and got up to take off the ruined dress. She was not the girl in the mirror. There was no one here except herself, after all.