

WALK THROUGH FIRE

You Did It, Baby

MILLIE

“**G**IRL, I AIN’T tryin’ on no Valentinos,” Elvira declared.

“Vira, those are *amazing*,” Gwen returned, standing next to where Elvira was sitting in Nordstrom’s shoe department (and incidentally, Gwen was wearing a pair of bronze Prada pumps that she was taking for a spin). “You *have* to try them on.”

I watched Elvira’s eyes narrow.

“Gwen, Hawk doesn’t pay me minimum wage for herding his commandos. But the sky isn’t the limit either. And you *know* I have a strict monthly policy.”

Gwen opened her mouth to speak but didn’t when Elvira lifted her hand with her sharp, talon-pointed, platinum-polished nails, shaking an upward-raised index finger at Gwen with each point she made next.

“One handbag or one pair of shoes or one outfit or one free-for-all at Charming Charlie or Francesca’s per month. No additions. No exceptions.” She dropped her hand and said in a near-mutter I still could hear from my distance, mainly because I was listening with everything I had. “Except when the new spring and fall lines come out. Then I can go crazy.”

“Have you bought a pair of shoes this month?” Mara, sitting next to Elvira, asked her friend.

“Yes. The teal Joies. First day of the month,” Elvira answered.

“Those are hot,” Tabby decreed, inspecting the Manolo display.

“I know, that’s why they’re mine,” Elvira returned.

Tabby grinned at Lanie as Camille noted, “You also got that John Hardy serpent ring.”

“What?” Malik, standing at my back, rumbled quietly.

“Shush,” I hushed Malik.

“Shush,” Elvira shushed Camille. “Snakes don’t count. I can buy as many snakes as I want.”

“That’s an exception,” Tess pointed out.

“Technically, yes. John Hardy goes the way of the serpent, I relent,” Elvira told Tess.

“Just saying,” Tyra put in, settling into a knee in the vacant seat on the other side of Elvira, wearing a pair of Weitzman’s with a fringe ankle strap she was also trying on, “you made one exception, you can make another.”

“Those shoes are nearly nine hundred dollars,” Elvira retorted.

“You’ll kick yourself if you don’t try them on, then you come back next month and they’re gone,” Tracy put in.

“Am I talking to myself?” Elvira asked the shoe area at large then pinpointed Tracy with her gaze. “*They’re nine hundred dollars*. I make decent money but my man’s the po-po. Which means he’s got a gun and knows how to use it. I come home with more than my allotted purchases this month, his head will explode. In that instance, I’d hafta hope he doesn’t explode mine before his goes. And, just sayin’, I like his head the way it is, specifically his mouth.”

When the girls all smiled at each other, Elvira finished.

“And he’s got good eyes.”

She was being stingy.

Malik had good *everything*.

I heard a chuckle from behind me telling me Malik was amused at his woman’s words.

But I was beginning to panic.

I turned to him, starting, “This isn’t funny. She’s not gonna—”

I stopped talking in mid-sentence when I saw the unexpected (and unwelcome) sight of Tack standing beside Malik. I also saw Logan making his way around Malik to me where I was hiding behind a column (with Malik). And the rest of Chaos—not a joke, *the entirety of the club*—was assembling around us.

They weren’t supposed to be here!

They were going to mess up the surprise!

“What on earth?” I hissed.

Logan bent in, aiming a kiss at my neck, which I, of course, refused, jerking away (too late, I felt his lips—I also felt my anger, though that didn’t mean I didn’t like the feel of his lips).

When he lifted up, I locked my eyes with his.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded to know.

“You think we’re gonna miss this?” he asked.

I got him. I totally understood.

If Elvira would try on the damned shoes, this was going to be huge. Colossal. Epic.

Amazing.

No one would want to miss it.

I’d planned it that way.

But they were going to screw the pooch, a bevy of bikers hanging around Nordstrom’s shoe department.

The column hid me. It *barely* hid Malik, he was so tall and broad. No way it’d hide an entire motorcycle club.

“She’s gonna see you and you’re gonna spoil the surprise,” I snapped in a hushed tone.

“Babe, Vira’s in the shoe section at Nordstrom. Every Chaos brother across the state and the ones that are dead could rise, we could have a party, and she wouldn’t notice,” Tack remarked.

I had to admit this might be true.

“Well, be quiet and inconspicuous,” I ordered, giving in.

Tack grinned at me.

I huffed at him and looked to Logan.

He was grinning at me too.

Therefore I huffed his way as well.

His grin got bigger.

Whatever!

“See Hawk didn’t get the order to be inconspicuous.” I heard Joker mutter and I turned my attention to him only to whirl in the direction he was looking.

And across the shoe department, not ten feet away from Elvira and her girl gang, I spotted Hawk Delgado, Gwen’s husband, Elvira’s boss. He stood leaning against his own column and not being discreet about it *at all*.

Making matters worse, Lieutenants Mitch Lawson and Brock Lucas were hanging with him, arms crossed on their chests, eyes fixed to the girl gang, expectant grins tugging at their mouths that would make panties melt at a glance. I knew that because I was ticked and that was what was happening to mine.

All Elvira had to do was look over her shoulder and all would be lost.

And Elvira would look, one way or another. Between Chaos and the commando/cop brigade, there was enough hot guy vibe wafting around willy-nilly to melt marble.

Damn these men!

“My woman doesn’t buy those shoes, I get home, I’m tannin’ her hide.” I heard Tack mutter.

The shoes Tyra was trying on were hot, no mistake about it. And it was always nice to know a man appreciated good shoes.

Still, he was speaking and they were all messing with my well-orchestrated mojo so I gave him the evil eye.

“What do you think?” I heard Carissa call, and I again turned toward the action. She’d wandered not far from the group and was holding up a silvery-gold, spike-heeled bootie adorned with belts and studs. “Do you think Joker would like these?”

“Jesus, fuck,” Joker growled.

That was an answer.

An affirmative one.

“Yes,” Gwen, Tess, Mara, Tyra, Tabby, Lanie, Camille, Tracy and Elvira all said in unison.

Yes! I screamed inside my head.

“Right answer, brother,” Hound murmured.

See?

I turned to the boys, lifting a hand and slashing it downward. “Would you guys *hush*?”

The guys either grinned at me or each other.

I looked to Malik.

“It’s all good, sweetheart,” he said in his honey voice.

“Okay, Malik,” I said in my girl-in-a-trance voice (this happened a lot after Malik spoke directly to me . . . or indirectly, for that matter).

Logan threw an arm around my shoulders.

Ah, that’s who I belonged to.

I looked up at him.

He was grinning too.

“Get her a six and a half. And a seven, just in case,” Gwen ordered the shoe salesperson whose name was Raul.

I knew this because I knew Raul and about everyone in the Nordstrom shoe department and not just because I also shopped there.

Those employees on duty were also watching the show but doing a lot better job at being surreptitious about it.

Raul rushed away.

“What’d I say, Gwen?” Elvira asked crossly.

Gwen waved her hand in front of her face. “It doesn’t hurt to try them on.”

“When have I ever put on a pair of Valentinos that I didn’t buy?” Elvira asked sharply.

“Those flip-flops,” Lanie answered for Gwen immediately.

“When have I ever put on a pair of Valentino *heels* that I didn’t buy?” Elvira amended her question, voicing it no less sharply, eyes now aimed at Lanie.

Lanie shrugged and smiled.

“Here they are!” Raul yelled, rushing toward the girl gang *way too soon*, brandishing two Valentino shoe boxes.

“The jig is up,” I whispered in despair. “No sales associate hits the Nordstrom shoe department back room and comes back in *a minute*. There’re miles of wonderland back there! She’s *so totally* gonna figure it out.”

“Relax,” Logan murmured in my ear.

I didn’t relax. I watched anxiously as Elvira’s brows snapped together when Raul skidded to a halt in front of her chair and dropped immediately to his knee.

“Let’s just get rid of these,” he said, pulling off Elvira’s platform pumps and tossing them aside, like they weren’t Louboutin.

I swallowed a gasp.

Elvira looked like she was getting angry.

“Be cool. Be cool. Be cool, Raul,” I chanted under my breath.

I heard Logan chuckle.

I elbowed him in the stomach.

I heard Logan swallow a grunt through a chuckle.

I fought back a frustrated scream.

Box lid thrown off. Tissue rustling. Then Raul unearthed a daring baby blue patent leather peep-toe, platform pump. I swallowed another gasp (this time for the shoe, it was a work of art).

So did the girl gang. I heard them.

Raul slid one on.

I held my breath.

Raul slid the other one on.

I reached one hand up to grab on to the tips of Logan’s fingers.

His curled around mine.

The other hand I sent in search of Malik’s. My fingers brushed his and I felt his big, warm hand close around mine.

“There we go. Take them for a spin,” Raul suggested, springing away from Elvira with more excitement than even a possible sale of Valentino shoes inspired, taking his feet.

Malik’s grip got tight.

My chest started to burn.

Elvira stood.

“Somethin’s hittin’ my toe,” she stated.

I felt my eyes begin to sting.

“What? That’s impossible,” Raul declared.

“Well, I feel it,” Elvira returned. Lifting her foot straight leg in front of her, she inspected the shoe. “I see it. It’s right—”

I gave Malik’s hand a squeeze and whispered, “That’s it, my man, you’re on.”

He let me go.

The girl gang circled Elvira, not too close, not too far, with no one cutting off access to her from Malik.

He strode her way.

I felt the boys gather closer behind me.

Hawk, Mitch and Brock approached the chairs.

“Sweet baby Jesus,” Elvira whispered, her gaze riveted to the shoe.

My eyes stung more.

Elvira’s head snapped back, her foot came down and her platinum-taloned fingers came to her mouth as she spied Malik.

He moved right to her and instantly dropped to a knee.

I heard a couple of whimpers, one of which was mine.

I watched as Malik untied the thin, satin ribbon that held an extraordinary, custom-made, cushion-cut diamond engagement ring to the exquisite signature Valentino bow.

But he stayed on his knee as he tipped his head back.

He lifted the ring up between two fingers.

I sniffled.

Logan's arm tightened and I was shuffled in front of him as he curled it around my neck.

"How 'bout it, baby?" Malik's smooth, deep voice wound through the Nordstrom shoe department, soothing anyone within hearing distance with its lullaby. "You feel like spending eternity with me?"

Elvira stood frozen, staring down at her man, her fingertips still to her mouth.

I held my breath again.

And I felt a corresponding tear fall when I saw the drop leak from her eye.

"Baby," Malik whispered, surging up.

He saw it too.

Elvira collapsed in his arms.

I let out an audible sob.

Logan's other arm curved around me.

"I'm gonna take that as a yes," Malik said.

Just Elvira's head jerked back.

"Can I buy the shoes?" she asked on an emotion-filled wail.

Malik smiled.

I felt the beautiful pain of a giggle forcing itself through tears.

"Absolutely," Malik answered.

Elvira's body visibly bucked as she again collapsed into her man.

It kept shaking, and Malik held on tight, as we all moved forward. All of us, including some customers who didn't know our family at all, they were just along on a joyous ride.

"You gonna stop bawlin' long enough for the man to put on the bling?" Big Petey eventually called, a smile in his voice carving so deep that voice shuddered.

"Yes." I heard muffled, coming from Elvira. "Yes." It came louder as Elvira pulled her face out of Malik's chest. She slapped her hand on said chest repeatedly with each next, "Yes, yes, yes!"

Malik slid the ring on. It fit (as it would, there was a reason Elvira had been turned on to that John Hardy ring).

After the happy sighs that came as Elvira studied the symbol of a beautiful future, Malik was clearly done with giving Elvira her reaction time.

It was Malik's time.

I knew this when he pulled her into his arms, bent his head, and laid a long wet one on her.

And when I said long, I meant *long*.

And wet.

Nice.

This continued through "oo's" and "ah's" and then hoots and hollers.

And Malik had barely lifted his head when we all fell on them like locusts.

It would be while the Nordstrom staff was handing out the chilled champagne in delicate flutes that I'd arranged (and setting out the silver trays of chocolate-covered strawberries, Elvira's favorites—enough for family, staff and random customers) when I realized in all the tears and giggles, hugs and handshakes and shared happiness, Hawk hadn't approached.

I turned my head his way to see he was standing removed, Gwen tucked to his side, his wife talking animatedly to Lanie (still wearing the Pradas she was obviously *so* going to take home).

But his eyes were on Elvira.

I looked to Vira.

She was eyes to Hawk.

I felt my belly get warm as my heart squeezed.

I knew Hawk Delgado had two brothers, a passel of nieces and nephews, a mom, a dad, a wife and three children.

Witnessing that look pass between them, I also knew Hawk had one sister.

My eyes got wet again.

“You did it, baby.”

Logan’s voice in my ear tore my attention from the moment Elvira and Hawk were sharing.

I gave it to my man.

“Perfect,” he said.

I felt my soft smile and swayed into Logan.

He took my weight but I turned my gaze to Malik.

It took a while. He had other things to do, one of these being holding his new fiancée like he was never going to let go (and I suspected he wouldn’t) and accepting congratulations from people he knew and people he didn’t.

But eventually, his warm brown eyes came to me.

They were smiling.

Yes.

I did it.

I organized the perfect proposal.

Absolutely.

Now . . .

The wedding.

The End