



Daydreams of You

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: When 29-year-old Heather agrees to spend a weekend posing as her best friend Megan's girlfriend, she anticipates a light-hearted escape from the relentless pace of New York City. However, the quaint Pennsylvania countryside holds a startling revelation: Megan's aunt is the captivating 47-year-old Vanessa, the same woman with whom Heather shared an unforgettable night at a city bar.

Engulfed in the festivities of a family vow renewal, Heather is propelled into the role of Megan's loving partner. Simultaneously, her genuine attraction to Vanessa grows, making each moment an intricate dance of stolen glances and suppressed desires. The age gap between them only heightens the tension, as they navigate the blurred lines of their unexpected reunion.

As Heather finds herself more entangled in the deception, her struggle to maintain loyalty to Megan intensifies her internal conflict. Torn between her burgeoning feelings for Vanessa and her commitment to her friend, Heather faces the challenge of balancing truth and desire.

Total Pages (Source): 34

It was already dark by the time Heather got out of the office and down to the busy streets of lower Manhattan. The frigid winter air hit her as soon as she started walking, and she tugged on her scarf, making sure it covered as much of her neck and chest as possible. After being indoors all day and missing lunch due to a tight deadline from a demanding client, the chilly air was invigorating.

Heather had stopped by Megan's office on her way out, just to see when and where they were going tonight, but it turned out Megan had a date lined up. Heather was thrilled for her, obviously, but it just meant that their normal Friday routine wasn't happening.

So, instead of hitting a gay bar together like they did most Friday nights, Heather found herself wandering towards her favorite Mexican spot, knowing she'd need to eat before she could even think about having a few drinks.

Heather continued her walk, the sound of her heels clicking against the pavement as she turned down a quieter street. She took a deep breath, inhaling the chilly night air, her breath coming out in a cloud of smoke before she caught sight of the orange neon sign up ahead. She strode towards what were, in her opinion, the best tacos in the city.

Her stomach rumbled as she ordered, the sizzling sound of chicken or shrimp on the grill filling the tiny restaurant. She took a seat beside the window, watching the occasional person go by, wondering how so few people seemed to know about this place.

A few minutes later, the server arrived with a sizzling plate of chicken tacos and a side of rice and beans. Heather thanked him and dug in, the smell making her realize just how hungry she was.

As she ate, she tried not to think about the heavy workload ahead of her next week. She was finally getting the recognition she thought she deserved as a talented graphic designer, but the company she worked for were putting a lot on her plate.

Megan knew exactly how she felt. She was a creative director at the same marketing agency, but she seemed to be resigned to the idea that it was just part of the business they were in. The clients paid a lot, and that just came with a certain level of pressure and unrealistic deadlines.

Heather wasn't so sure, but she'd only been in the job five months, and she'd gained an amazing friend out of it if nothing else.

It was hard to believe that was how long she'd known Megan for, because it really felt like five years, not five months. They'd clicked almost immediately, and at least that kept Heather looking forward to going into the office each morning. They went out for dinner or to a gay bar at least twice a week, because their heavy workloads didn't allow for much more than a lunch break together and maybe a five minute chat while they were getting coffee in the morning.

Heather might be losing her wingwoman though. Megan was trying out just about every dating app and website that existed, and Heather just wasn't interested in that. Megan always seemed so hopeful when she read someone's profile or saw their photo. All signs pointed to a particular woman being just Megan's type, but the dates never seemed to live up to her expectations.

Hopefully, tonight's date would be different. Heather didn't get it, but she had to admire her friend for putting herself out there continuously when she knew she would

have already given up.

She left a few dollar bills on the table before she left, rearranging her scarf again as the brisk night air seemed to find that last bit of skin that she'd left exposed. She could go home. She was still in her work clothes, so she probably should. Not that she didn't look good.

Heather kind of secretly enjoyed wearing her business casual attire, loving how her charcoal pants fit her snugly, her black belt more for show than for necessity. She had a black silky button up blouse on, and her light brown hair was down with just a few waves in it. Her makeup still looked decent, the smokey eyeshadow highlighting her blue eyes. She could definitely go out like this. Especially when she was just thinking of going to a wine bar instead of a night club.

She might even download one of those apps Megan was using, but even thinking about it now made her roll her eyes as she walked, the hum of traffic and horns blaring mixing with the conversations going on around her as people passed by her on the sidewalk, some on their phones, some tourists wondering if they'd missed their street.

Heather just couldn't see herself ever creating a profile. She preferred the randomness of going out to a gay bar. Yeah, even in New York City, the faces were the same most nights, but at least there was the potential for something to happen, for a connection to be made with someone she might never have been drawn to after reading their dating profile.

She needed to see if she had a connection with someone. It might sound cheesy or a little esoteric, but that was the way she approached dating. Not that it had gotten her very far. She'd met some amazing women over the years, but at the age of twenty-nine, she was still single. Part of that was due to the fact that she couldn't seem to resist an older woman. Well, she usually did the chasing, so was resist even the right

word?

Either way, Heather always seemed to run into problems after a few nights together. If the woman wasn't in the middle of getting a divorce, she wasn't sure that she could be seen dating someone so much younger than her.

Megan had no problem teasing her. Even in the five months that they'd known each other, she'd witnessed two disasters. The last one was particularly stupid, because Heather had walked right into it. Even though she'd had a great time with Lara, she'd made it very clear from the start that she wasn't out, and that she had no interest in changing that. Heather should have forgotten about her then and there, but no, she'd done the opposite.

So, maybe Heather could do with changing up her approach to dating, but it definitely wasn't going to be by following Megan's lead and posting her picture online for people to judge her in three seconds and swipe one way or the other.

As she neared the heart of the Village, the streets came alive. The warm glow of restaurant windows and chatter of people spilled out onto the sidewalks. The aroma of garlic and baked bread wafted out of an Italian restaurant, mingling with the crisp winter air.

Finally, she arrived at the wine bar. A warm amber light glowed from within. Through the window, she could see patrons seated at the bar, conversing over glasses of wine. The faint sound of jazz floated out each time the door opened.

Heather rubbed her hands together, cold from the walk over, and stepped inside. The cozy space enveloped her, the soft lighting and smooth jazz welcoming. She unwound her scarf and shrugged off her coat, already feeling herself begin to relax. Settling into an open seat at the bar, she ordered a glass of Malbec, eager to unwind after a long week. As she sipped the rich, velvety wine, she took in the atmosphere -

the quiet conversations, the mellow music.

Her eyes caught with a woman's sitting at one of the round tables beside the windows, her black hair tossed over one shoulder. She was wearing a long-sleeved white scoop neck top that hugged her figure, both arms resting on the table, and although she was sitting alone, this woman oozed confidence.

Heather forced herself to keep her eyes moving. She trusted her gaydar, but she'd never been confident enough to approach a woman away from a gay bar or a Pride event. It just seemed too intimidating, the chance of humiliation or embarrassment too high.

She sucked in a breath as she faced the bar, her hands a little clammy as she clasped them together on the counter. There was no way that woman was actually looking at her. She was probably doing the very same thing Heather was, just looking around and taking in her surroundings.

Heather ran a hand through her hair, tilting her head to the side, not even sure if she'd be able to see the woman with that subtle turn of her head, but she could, and the woman was looking right back at her.

Except this time, Heather didn't look away. The woman darted her eyes away first, and now Heather's heart was beating faster.

No fucking way.

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Heather tried to hide her smile as she reached for her glass of wine and took another sip.

Well, that changed things.

2

Vanessa's eyes scanned the dimly lit wine bar, taking in the atmosphere. The soft glow of candles flickered on each table, casting a warm and inviting light over the room. The air was thick with the scent of red wine and rich conversation. She sipped her glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, enjoying the smooth taste as it coated her tongue.

Vanessa leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs as she took another slow sip of wine. She wasn't in a hurry tonight. Her hotel was just a few blocks away, but she was happy to linger at the bar a little longer.

She was on her second glass of wine, and after a long day of walking around the city, she found herself staying for another drink, enjoying sitting alone and doing some people watching.

Vanessa had gone back to her hotel room to get changed after she'd had some dinner. She knew she'd end up at a gay bar eventually. That was the reason she made these little weekend trips into the city, but for right now, she was quite content to sip her wine and soak up the atmosphere. It wasn't crowded, but there was sophistication in the air.

Vanessa loved where she was from, a typical rural town in eastern Pennsylvania

where just about everyone knew everyone else. She had no intention of ever living anywhere else, but she looked forward to her weekends away in Philadelphia or New York.

Her hometown might be progressive enough, but she had no where like this to go. There was something special about Greenwich Village. The history of this part of New York City always reminded her to be grateful of how far society has come, and it didn't matter if it was a cafe or a restaurant or a wine bar like this. Everywhere that Vanessa had ever gone to had this welcoming feeling.

It was hard to describe. Her friends and family back home probably thought she always came to the city to meet other gay women, and while that was true, it was about so much more than that.

It was nice to walk around and know she was surrounded by people like her rather than being one of the very few out people in her small town.

It was also really nice to just sit alone. She could never do that at a bar or cafe at home. Someone she knew would wave and come over, assuming that she'd rather have company than sit alone.

Out of the corner of her eye, Vanessa noticed a young woman enter the bar. Even from a distance, she could tell the woman was striking - light brown hair that fell a few inches below her shoulder, sharp cheekbones, full lips. She looked to be in her early thirties. There was an air of sophistication about her, like she'd just left an important board meeting to come here.

Vanessa found herself watching the woman, intrigued by her beauty, silently hoping that this woman would come over and ask to join her.

She quickly shook that thought away. This wasn't a gay bar. The chances that this

woman would even be interested in her were so slim.

The woman turned, slowly looking around the bar, and she noticed Vanessa's gaze. Their eyes locked for a brief moment, but then she continued to survey the room.

Vanessa's fingertips tingled, and she took a deep breath, not entirely sure why she was feeling so on edge, giddy almost.

Before Vanessa could look away, the woman's eyes were on her again, and Vanessa tore her eyes away this time without thinking, embarrassed at having been caught staring, her pulse tripping.

She reached for her drink, completely taken aback by what had just happened.

Nothing. Nothing had really happened.

She'd just met another woman's eyes across the bar, probably accidentally, and Vanessa couldn't believe the way her body had reacted.

It hadn't been that long since she was with someone. And in all the nights she'd spent at gay bars either here or in Philadelphia, she'd never wanted to talk to someone as much as she wanted this woman to slide off her stool and come join her.

Vanessa was used to approaching women. She didn't need to be chased, but for some reason, possibly because she wasn't actually at a gay bar, Vanessa couldn't get her feet to move.

There was also the fact that this woman had to be ten, if not fifteen years younger than her.

Vanessa had never dated anyone more than three or four years younger or older than

her, and now that she was forty-seven, she really didn't want to turn into a cliché.

Then why was she still looking at this woman?

Vanessa pressed her lips together and forced herself to concentrate on the people outside, bundled up against the cold, some strolling, others striding past the window with purpose.

Vanessa sighed and turned her attention back to her wine, swirling the deep red liquid around in her glass. She couldn't stop thinking about the woman at the bar. Curiosity gnawed at her, and she found her eyes wandering in the woman's direction again, taking in her well-defined jawline and long brown hair, golden streaks catching under the pendant lights hanging above the bar.

Their eyes met once more, and this time, the woman offered a hint of a smile. Vanessa's heart fluttered in her chest, and once again, she was the one to break the eye contact.

Maybe this wasn't as innocent as she'd initially thought. And maybe she could actually trust her gaydar.

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What other reason was there for this woman to keep glancing her way? She didn't look in any way confused by Vanessa's lingering gaze or creeped out. Vanessa would nearly say the opposite with the way her lips had curved ever so slightly just a moment ago.

When she looked back up, the woman was sliding gracefully off her barstool, wine glass in hand. Vanessa froze, pulse pounding, as the woman approached her table, her mind struggling to catch up with this new development.

Vanessa was not mid-fantasy. This woman was standing in front of her table, her hand resting on the back of the chair opposite Vanessa.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I join you?" the woman asked, her voice smooth and confident.

Vanessa gestured wordlessly to the empty chair. The woman sat, crossing one leg over the other. Up close, Vanessa could see she was even more striking, with piercing blue eyes and full lips painted crimson.

"I'm Heather," she said, her eyes unwavering.

"Vanessa." She swallowed down her nerves, reminding herself that she had every reason to be confident in this situation. She was just so unaccustomed to meeting women outside of gay bars.

"Nice to meet you, Vanessa." Heather smiled, leaning back casually in her chair. "I couldn't help but notice you from across the bar. I hope I'm not intruding."

Vanessa's cheeks flushed. "No, not at all. I'm happy for the company." She bit her lip for a second, wondering if she should assume she knew why Heather had joined her, or was she jumping ahead of herself?

"Are you?" Heather asked, her voice light and curious. "I feel like you might be wary of strange women coming over to your table."

"Wary? No." Vanessa shook her head as she absently slid her fingers up and down the stem of her wine glass. "Just surprised. Impressed, really." She wet her lips. Now or never. "I would never have the courage to approach a woman at a straight bar like this."

"Straight bar... Gay bar..." Heather held her gaze. "If I see someone looking at me the way you were, I'd be a fool not to at least introduce myself."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then I'm wrong. It's better than never knowing what might have been." Heather took a sip of wine, and Vanessa had to admire her confidence.

The only question was, what was she going to do with this bold yet intriguing woman who had materialized at her table?

Heather held her gaze, a subtle challenge in her eyes, as if she was daring Vanessa to make the next move.

Vanessa took a long drink. Isn't this exactly what she came into the city for? To spend the night flirting with a woman she never would have met otherwise? Maybe she wouldn't be heading on to a gay bar tonight. Maybe she'd stay right here and see what her conversation with Heather would bring.

“Am I wrong?” Heather asked, taking Vanessa away from her thoughts.

Vanessa held her gaze. “No,” she said, a smile coming to her lips. “No. Not at all.”

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Heather bit the inside of her cheek as Vanessa’s smile slowly reached her eyes. There was a glint there, a flirtatious challenge in them, and Heather still couldn’t believe this was actually happening. That she’d had the courage to come over. That she’d got right to the point, quickly discovering that she had a chance with this stunning woman, or at the very least, that she was potentially interested.

“So, Vanessa,” Heather said, “What brings you here tonight?”

“I’m staying just a few blocks away, and I was planning on having a drink or two before finding a gay bar to check out.” She bit her lip for a second. “I don’t think I’d get that far entirely sober.”

Heather’s eyebrow quirked. “That surprises me.”

“Really?” Vanessa said with a soft, throaty laugh that Heather wanted to hear more of. “Why? I’m sure that’s not unusual.”

“When I noticed you, sitting here, that was my first thought. That you looked so confident.”

Vanessa smiled, a bubbly laugh escaping her lips. “Well, that’s good to hear. I had no idea that I possessed those kind of acting skills.”

“If I hadn’t come over here...” Heather waited for Vanessa to meet her eyes again. “How long would it have taken you to introduce yourself?”

Vanessa's eyebrows lifted. "I'm pretty certain that I wouldn't have."

Heather shook her head. "That would have been a shame."

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“Hmm. I know, but that’s what would have happened. I would have finished this glass of wine and put on my coat. And I would’ve taken one last look in your direction, willing myself to take a chance before talking myself out of it while I pulled open that door.”

“I’m glad that I came over then,” Heather said, reaching for her glass and taking a sip.

“Me too.” Vanessa held her gaze, and Heather couldn’t ever remember feeling this kind of intensity with someone she’d just met.

It was electric. And Heather wasn’t going to let this night get away from her.

This was the kind of thing she’d dreamed about.

“Where are you from?” Heather asked.

“A small town in Eastern Pennsylvania. It’s barely a dot on the map.”

Heather tilted her head. “And what brings you into the city?”

“I go to Philadelphia sometimes, but mostly New York, and it’s just to be around people like me. Don’t get me wrong. I love my hometown, and it’s actually not the worst. It’s fairly progressive, but it can’t compare to coming to the Village.”

“I get that.”

“What about you?” Vanessa asked before she took a drink.

“I’m from the Shore. Asbury Park is probably the nearest place that most people would know. But I live here.”

“Do you normally come here?”

“This is maybe my third time here in the seven years I’ve been living in the city. I’m normally with my best friend, and we go to a club, but I’m on my own tonight, and I just thought I’d have a glass of wine after a long week at work. Have you been here before?”

Vanessa’s half-smile spread into a gorgeous one as she looked out the window, her eyes almost twinkling as she spoke, her gaze landing on Heather again. “I’ve never been here before. I was just walking by, and it caught my eye.”

Heather swallowed, her heart thumping in her chest for no reason other than assuming that Vanessa was thinking the same thing she was. How their evenings had lined up. How they’d both ended up here at the same time when neither of them were regulars here.

A comfortable silence settled between them for a moment, both women taking sips of their wine as the murmur of the bar swirled around them. Heather studied Vanessa’s features in the low light - the elegant curve of her jawline, the fullness of her lips. She was stunning, refined. And yet, there was a warmth that radiated from her, an openness that Heather found so alluring.

“What are you thinking right now?” Vanessa asked, and she caught Heather staring.

Heather lifted her gaze from Vanessa’s lips to her eyes, not even the tiniest bit embarrassed. “I’m thinking that... This kind of thing doesn’t happen to me.”

“And what sort of thing is that?” Vanessa’s voice was serious, her eyes locked on Heather’s, and for a second, Heather wondered if she was imagining this energy between them.

She wasn’t missing this opportunity. If she was wrong, she might as well know it now. “The kind of thing that doesn’t even seem real. I feel like I’m in the middle of a movie right now,” Heather said with a bit of a smile before she shook her head. “I’m probably not making much sense.”

“No. I know what you mean. It does feel a little surreal.” Vanessa’s dark hair fell across her eye as she reached for her wine glass. “I’ve never had a night out in the city start like this,” she said before she took a sip.

“And how do you want it to end?” The words were out of Heather’s mouth before she even had a chance to think about it.

Vanessa’s hazel green eyes lingered on Heather as she sat back in her chair, exuding a sense of confidence that was both subtle and captivating.

Heather’s breath caught in her throat as she held Vanessa’s gaze. The low hum of the bar seemed to fade into the background, the space between them charged with an irresistible tension.

Vanessa leaned forward ever so slightly, her eyes dancing in the soft light. “How do I want the night to end?” she repeated in a low voice. She let the question linger for a moment, her eyes never leaving Heather’s.

Heather could feel her pulse quickening as she anticipated Vanessa’s response. This woman was bold, self-assured in a way that set Heather’s nerves tingling. She had no idea what Vanessa would say next.

Finally, Vanessa spoke, her voice like velvet. “I think you know exactly how I’d like this night to end.”

Vanessa’s eyes flashed with amusement. Slowly, deliberately, she reached across the table and brushed her fingers against the back of Heather’s hand. Heather inhaled sharply at the contact, the slightest touch feeling electric.

Heather felt a shiver of excitement run through her as she watched Vanessa’s fingers graze against the back of her hand. The touch was light but deliberate, sending tingles up her arm and making her heart race with anticipation. She bit her lip, trying to appear innocent, but her mind was ablaze with thoughts of what could happen next.

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In the dimly lit bar, Heather's heart pounded in her chest as Vanessa stood up, her eyes locking with Heather's. A fleeting wave of panic washed over her, the fear of having pushed things too far and sending Vanessa running.

But then, to Heather's surprise, Vanessa stopped beside her chair, her fingertips light on her forearm. "What are you having?" she asked, her voice doing something to Heather.

"Malbec, please."

"Okay, don't go anywhere," Vanessa said, her hand resting on her shoulder for a second before heading to the bar.

As Vanessa waited at the bar for their drinks, Heather couldn't tear her eyes away from Vanessa. She was captivated by her every move, every nuance of her expression. Vanessa seemed to exude an aura of confidence and self-assurance that Heather found intoxicating.

She still couldn't believe that any of this was real. Yes, they lived a few hours apart, and Heather had already had so many failed attempts at starting something serious with someone who was significantly older than her to have any real expectations.

But who needed expectations?

Heather was starting to wonder if she was wasting her time trying to settle down with someone.

She'd had rules in place before about one-night stands, because they never ended well. She'd sworn them off for the last year, because she'd always been left wanting more, but right now, that was all Heather could think about.

What would it be like with Vanessa? What would her lips feel like against her own? How would she taste? Who would be the aggressor?

Screw her rules. Meeting Vanessa here tonight was so random. There was no way that Heather could turn Vanessa down if she asked her back to her hotel room later.

4

Vanessa carried their two glasses of wine back to the table. Before she could over think it, she set them down, and casually moved her chair so that it was alongside Heather, leaving Vanessa's back to the window now.

"Thanks," Heather said, her striking blue eyes suddenly even more captivating now that Vanessa could appreciate every subtle shade and fleck of color.

"Cheers," Vanessa said, clinking their glasses together before taking a sip of wine, savoring the hints of black cherry, tobacco, and vanilla mingling on her tongue.

"Cheers," Heather echoed. She turned her head slightly, their faces now inches apart.

Vanessa's eyes dropped to Heather's lips for a brief moment before meeting her heated gaze again. Vanessa crossed one leg over the other, her hand resting on her own thigh before she found the courage to brush the back of her hand along Heather's underneath the table.

Vanessa couldn't miss Heather's sharp intake of breath. It was a subtle, innocent touch, but it had an undeniable effect on Heather. Vanessa noticed the slight flush on

her cheeks, the way her bright blue eyes seemed to smolder as they held Vanessa's gaze.

So she let her hand linger, tracing feather-light patterns on the back of Heather's hand with the back of her own underneath the seclusion of the table.

"How do you want tonight to end?" Vanessa asked.

Heather's lips slid into an easy smile. "You didn't answer me when I asked you that question."

"I thought it was obvious how I wanted tonight to go," Vanessa said, her own lips tugging into a smile.

"I could say the same. That it should be beyond obvious what I want." Heather's voice was so smooth that Vanessa couldn't stop herself from imagining that voice in her ear later, throaty and breathless, Vanessa's name on her lips.

"You could?"

"Hmm. I could. But I won't."

Vanessa waited for Heather to continue, her fingers slowing as her heart beat faster.

"Instead," Heather started, reaching for her glass, "I'll say that I'm struggling to believe this is real. That we both ended up here, at the same time, on the same night. And that as much as I've gotten away from one-night stands as I've gotten older, I think I would spend the rest of my life regretting not suggesting that we see where tonight takes us."

Vanessa watched Heather take a drink, her long, slender fingers gracefully holding

her glass. The mention of Heather's age had Vanessa withdrawing her hand from underneath the table, picking up her glass and taking a sip.

"I know that probably sounds dramatic," Heather said, turning to meet Vanessa's eyes, "But I really would. I don't think I've ever been so drawn to someone."

"I know what you mean," Vanessa said with a smile before she took another drink, a friendly game of tug-o-war going on in her head.

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A thought crossed her mind as she swirled the wine in her glass. She knew she looked good for her age. What if Heather thought she was only a few years older than her?

Heather angled her body towards Vanessa a little more, almost shielding her off from the rest of the bar as she placed a warm hand above her knee, the heat radiating through Vanessa's pants, sending a tingling sensation through her entire body with just that simple touch.

Although, maybe if this wasn't going to go anywhere, their age difference didn't matter.

Heather reached up to lightly brush Vanessa's hair behind her ear. "What are you thinking right now?"

Vanessa had to look away, because if she kept staring into those gorgeous eyes, she'd do anything Heather asked her to. "I'm thinking that I might be too old for you."

Vanessa fingers played with her wine glass, finally meeting Heather's eyes, a hint of a smile on her lips.

"I wouldn't have come over here if you were," Heather said matter-of-factly.

"Hmm, but how old do you think I am?"

Heather searched her eyes. "Forty-two."

"Is that your real guess or have you subtracted a few years to be polite?"

Heather laughed softly, and Vanessa couldn't stop herself from returning her smile. "That's my real guess. I would say thirty-nine, if I was trying to be polite. Your turn."

"My turn?" Vanessa asked.

"Yes."

"Thirty-two."

Heather arched an eyebrow before she took a drink. "Close."

"You weren't."

"I wasn't close?" Heather asked as she set her wine glass down on the table. "Huh. So you are in your thirties?"

Vanessa shook her head as she took another sip of wine, hiding her smile behind her glass.

"I'm twenty-nine," Heather said.

Vanessa swallowed her wine without choking on it. Wow. She had early thirties in her head as the worst case scenario. "Well, I am too old for you then."

"I really don't think so."

"I'm forty-seven," Vanessa said, reluctantly meeting Heather's eyes again, certain she'd see the blaze that had been burning in them start to fade.

"Again, I don't think you are." Heather's eyes studied her, her voice serious now.

“Look, I know that we’re probably not going to see each other again, but I didn’t feel right not saying it.”

“Thank you for being honest with me.” Heather’s gaze lowered to her lips, her hand moving a little higher on Vanessa’s thigh, and now she was the one who drew an unsteady breath.

It had been all talk, all looks and lingering gazes, but now this was suddenly very real, and for some reason, this felt so much more significant than any other night she’d had in the city.

5

“It’s getting late,” Vanessa said after she finished her wine. “Should we continue this conversation elsewhere?”

Heather’s heartbeat quickened. Once again, she was struck with this feeling that surely, at any moment now, she’d wake up. Because this couldn’t be real.

As Vanessa withdrew her hand and moved to gather her things, Heather’s mind raced. Was she really going to leave this bar with a complete stranger? An undeniably captivating stranger, but still.

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Although, they had gotten to know each other a little better over their last glass of wine. Heather hadn't thought about what Vanessa might do for a living in her small town, but for some reason, business owner didn't surprise her. Heather could easily picture Vanessa behind the counter at this quaint coffee shop, chatting with regular customers and charming new ones.

And as she watched Vanessa stand, graceful and elegant, Heather couldn't help but be captivated, like a moth to a flame. She couldn't take her eyes off of Vanessa's effortless poise and the way she carried herself with such quiet confidence. There was something magnetic about her, something that made it impossible for Heather to look away.

Vanessa gathered her purse and coat with an understated finesse, her movements fluid, graceful almost. Heather studied the fall of her dark hair over her shoulders. She was captivating in the most subtle of ways, exuding the kind of timeless beauty that came not from trying, but from just being.

Heather stood to join her, the effects of the wine making her movements feel dreamlike as she put on her coat. She wasn't drunk. Just pleasantly tipsy, and as if on autopilot, she followed Vanessa out of the bar and into the cool night air.

The sounds of the city enveloped them as they stepped onto the sidewalk.

"So," Heather said, her breath coming out in a cloud of smoke. "Where are we headed?"

"That's a good question." Vanessa glanced down a quiet looking street, away from

the bars and restaurants, and reached for Heather's hand, tugging her gently.

They were only a few steps away from the busy street they'd just left behind when Vanessa's feet slowed, and she gently pushed Heather back against the wall. Vanessa's eyes dropped briefly to Heather's lips before meeting her gaze.

Heather's heart pounded wildly in her chest. Vanessa's face was mere inches from her own, her intentions clear. Was this really happening?

The sounds of the city faded, and it was as if time had stopped. All that mattered was the spark that had ignited between them in that crowded bar.

Ever so slowly, Vanessa leaned in, her hazel green eyes locked intensely on Heather's. She moved with torturous restraint, drawing out each second. Gently, she brought her hand up to cradle Heather's cheek, her palm soft and warm against Heather's skin.

Heather's eyes fluttered shut, her body thrumming, her nerves taut as Vanessa's breath brushed against her lips, causing a wave of anticipation to wash over her. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Vanessa's lips met hers in the softest, most tender kiss.

Everything about tonight should have told her that this kiss would be nothing short of spectacular, and Heather sighed as she parted her lips against Vanessa's. The softness of the kiss caught her off guard, but it was the tenderness that made her knees buckle.

Heather's hands found their way to Vanessa's hips, pulling her closer. She could feel the warmth of Vanessa's body pressed against her own, the softness of her curves even through her jacket.

Heather's breath hitched as Vanessa's fingers grazed the back of her neck before

sliding into her hair. She could feel herself melting against Vanessa, losing herself in the feel of her lips, the taste of her tongue, the warmth of her body pressed against her own.

With a soft moan, Heather broke the kiss, her breath coming out in short, sharp gasps. Vanessa's eyes fluttered open, her gaze intense and smoldering.

"Let's go back to my hotel room," Vanessa murmured, her voice low and sultry.

6

As Vanessa held her hotel room door open for Heather, their eyes met, and Vanessa felt a rush of anticipation. Normally, the idea of sleeping with someone she'd just met would not have been appealing to her at all, but then again, she'd never met someone like Heather, and now Vanessa was entering new territory.

Heather stepped inside, her gaze sweeping over the room's king size bed and the soft glow of the bedside lamp as she shrugged off her coat and draped it over the back of a chair.

As the door clicked shut behind them, Vanessa hung up her jacket. She wet her lips as she stepped into the room, reaching out to take Heather's hand, her fingers brushing against the delicate skin of Heather's wrist.

The air between them seemed to crackle with energy, and Vanessa gently tugged Heather towards her, finding her lips in a smoldering kiss that only left Vanessa wanting more.

Heather's hands landed on her hips, and she spun Vanessa around, walking her backwards until Vanessa's back hit the wall, and Heather pressed her body against hers, her hand sliding underneath Vanessa's top.

The muscles in her stomach jumped as Vanessa sighed into the kiss, the warmth of Heather's wandering hand and graze of her fingernails against her skin sent a delicious shiver through her entire body.

Vanessa deepened the kiss, her hands on Heather's ass, a gasp escaping her lips as Heather slipped her thigh between Vanessa's legs, hitting her clit, and Vanessa slowly rocked her hips.

"Oh fuck," Vanessa moaned, throwing her head back as Heather's lips dropped to her neck, and Vanessa continued to grind her hips against Heather's leg. "If you don't stop, I'm going to come," Vanessa said, breathlessly, lifting her head to meet Heather's eyes, her hand on Heather's cheek.

Heather leaned into her, adding pressure with her thigh, their eyes locked, and then she took a step back.

Vanessa slumped against the wall, her pulse pounding in her ears, her clit aching for more, but they were both still fully dressed, and Vanessa wanted Heather in her bed.

Vanessa reached for Heather, grabbing a hold of her blouse and keeping her close enough to start popping open the buttons, revealing a black lacy bra.

Heather leaned in to kiss her again while Vanessa pushed the black silky fabric of her blouse off her shoulders. Vanessa's hands roamed over her bare shoulders and back as she parted her lips against Heather's, their tongues searching, exploring.

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Heather's hands went for the button of Vanessa's pants as they kissed, flicking it open, and lowering the zipper, giving the fabric a tug, and a chill came over Vanessa as they fell to the ground.

Heather broke the kiss. "This has to go," she said, her hands on the hem of Vanessa's top, already lifting it over her head, her eyes falling to the swell of Vanessa's breasts. "Beautiful," she whispered, her hand sliding over Vanessa's shoulder and up along her neck before she tangled her fingers in Vanessa's hair, guiding their lips back together.

Vanessa moaned as Heather's free hand palmed her breast through her bra, teasing her nipple with a swipe of her thumb.

Vanessa managed to reach behind Heather, her fingers fumbling with the clasp of Heather's bra while they kissed before finally getting it open and pushing the straps over her shoulders.

Vanessa's hand covered Heather's breast as their lips met again and again, and Heather swayed into her, both of them moaning now.

Vanessa thought their chemistry would extend to the bedroom, but this was beyond anything she could have imagined.

Heather pulled away and motioned for Vanessa to turn around.

Vanessa did, her hands against the wall for a second as she caught her breath. She could feel Heather's fingers dancing over her skin as she unhooked Vanessa's bra and

eased the straps down. Vanessa let her arms fall, and then her bra was on the floor.

Heather's hands replaced Vanessa's bra, sliding up along her side before cupping both of her breasts in her hands while her lips trailed kisses up her neck, sending an electric shiver right to Vanessa's core.

Vanessa fell back into her touch, reaching behind her, her hand on Heather's neck, and then one of Heather's hands slid further down, disappearing into the waistband of her underwear, grazing her clit, and Vanessa's knees buckled.

Vanessa's heart raced as Heather's fingers slid over her slick skin, the pressure against her clit growing more intense with each circle that Heather drew. Vanessa focused on the sensation, her eyes closed, her breath coming in gasps now.

Heather's other hand slid lower, hooking her fingers into the waistband of Vanessa's underwear, pulling them down, and Vanessa stepped out of them, kicking them aside.

Heather's hand slid back up, her fingers dipping between Vanessa's legs, stroking her slick folds from behind, and Vanessa's fell forward, her hand flat against the wall as a wave of pleasure washed over her.

Heather's lips were on her neck, her teeth grazing her sensitive skin. "I had every intention of moving this to the bed," Heather murmured against her ear, "But I can't wait. Is this okay?"

Vanessa reached back, her hand on Heather's ass, gripping her through the fabric of her gray pants, pulling her closer. "Yes," she managed.

As Heather entered her from behind, Vanessa's breath hitched, a gasp escaping her lips. Heather's other hand was still playing with her clit, and the sensation was overwhelming.

Vanessa's eyes slammed shut, and she leaned her head back against Heather's shoulder. Heather's fingers curled inside her, hitting a spot that made Vanessa's entire body tremble with pleasure.

Heather's lips were on her neck again, her teeth grazing her sensitive skin as she whispered, "You are so fucking sexy."

Vanessa couldn't answer, her mouth unable to form words as Heather's fingers moved in and out of her, her other hand still teasing her clit.

Heather's fingers slid deeper, and Vanessa moaned, her body tensing as a wave of pleasure washed over her. Vanessa could feel the pressure building inside her, and she knew she was close. Her entire body trembled as she felt the orgasm building from somewhere deep inside her.

Heather's lips were on her ear, her words a low whisper that sent a shiver down Vanessa's spine. "Come for me, Vanessa," Heather murmured, her voice thick with lust.

Vanessa's body tightened, and she felt her orgasm sneak up on her in a wave of pleasure that left her breathless. She fell back into Heather, her breath coming in ragged pants, and Heather's arm wrapped around her stomach.

"I got you," Heather said softly, her breath warm against Vanessa's ear.

Heather's fingers slowly slid out of her, and Vanessa slumped back against her, her heart racing, her body still trembling with pleasure.

Heather's hand slid up along her side, her fingers brushing against her breast as she turned Vanessa around, pulling her into her arms.

Vanessa's head fell against Heather's shoulder, her eyes closed as she reveled in the afterglow of her orgasm. She could feel Heather's heart racing against her own.

"That was intense," Vanessa managed to say, lifting her head to meet Heather's eyes.

Heather reached up and brushed a lock of Vanessa's hair behind her ear.

Vanessa felt Heather's hand find hers, leading her to the bed, and Vanessa sat down, looking up at Heather who stood at the foot of it, between Vanessa's legs.

Vanessa's eyes traveled from Heather's gorgeous eyes and wavy hair to her bare chest, her nipples hard, moving down over her flat stomach before she reached for the buckle on Heather's thin black belt, easing it open.

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It took her longer than it should have, still in a post-orgasmic daze, but when Heather's gray pants fell to the floor, she couldn't wait to have her way with this woman.

7

Heather was pretty sure that she'd never witnessed anything hotter than the way Vanessa had just come, struggling to stay standing, leaning back against Heather, her fingers digging into Heather's skin.

The way Vanessa was looking up at her now, her eyes drifting over her body as she unbutton Heather's pants, it was dizzying. Heather had never felt this wanted, and she inhaled a shaky breath as her work pants hit the floor, leaving her standing in just her underwear.

As her hands reached Heather's hips, Vanessa gently pulled her closer. Her fingers slid under the thin fabric of Heather's underwear, slowly easing them down her legs. Each movement was deliberate, unhurried, as if Vanessa was savoring every moment. The way her fingers traced the curve of Heather's hip, the way she took her time, it was intoxicating.

Heather could hardly breathe, her heart pounding in her chest as she felt the warmth of Vanessa's breath against her sex and then the heat of her tongue, parting her folds.

Heather's hands gripped Vanessa's shoulders, unable to hold herself up as Vanessa's tongue languidly explored.

“Oh, Vanessa,” Heather gasped as Vanessa’s tongue circled her clit, her hands tightening on Vanessa’s shoulders as she felt herself getting closer and closer to the edge with each swipe of her tongue.

Vanessa’s hands slid around to Heather’s ass, pulling her closer, her tongue working over her in, adding pressure, then taking it away. Heather could feel the warmth spreading throughout her body, her breathing turning ragged. She was starting to lose control.

Vanessa pulled back to look up at her. “Come here,” she said, her voice husky, guiding her onto her lap, slipping her hand between them.

Heather sunk into Vanessa, gasping as she entered her with a long, smooth stroke. “Oh fuck,” Heather moaned, her arm wrapped around Vanessa’s shoulders, her hips rocking back against Vanessa’s hand.

Vanessa’s fingers started to move faster, finding a rhythm, and Heather couldn’t help but let out a low, guttural moan. Vanessa’s eyes locked onto hers, the intensity in her gaze astounding.

Heather could feel Vanessa’s other hand sliding up her back, her fingernails raking over her skin. Heather was close, her body tensing around Vanessa’s fingers. Her breath was coming in short gasps now as her hips rocked against Vanessa’s hand, desperately seeking more.

“Oh, Vanessa,” Heather moaned, her voice trembling as she felt herself come undone. She dipped her head to find Vanessa’s lips as her body started to shake, warmth spreading through her.

Heather fell into Vanessa’s arms, her heart still pounding in her chest. Vanessa’s hand slid up her back and into her hair, bringing their lips together in a slow,

passionate kiss that Heather felt in every inch of her body.

Vanessa broke the kiss. "Can you stand?" she asked after a moment.

"Hm." Heather nodded, easing herself off Vanessa's lap.

Vanessa stood too, turning Heather and gently pushing her back onto the bed. Heather watched in awe as Vanessa climbed on top of her, covering Heather's body with her own, and the sensation of their naked bodies pressed together nearly made her come again she was that sensitive.

Vanessa's thigh slid between Heather's legs as her hand caressed Heather's skin, over her hip and side to massage Heather's breast while Vanessa's lips trailed up Heather's neck.

Heather was on fire. Her own hands roamed over Vanessa's soft skin, up her thighs and the curve of her hips before moving back down to her ass, pulling her closer.

Vanessa's mouth found her neck, her teeth lightly scraping against Heather's skin, while her hand slid between Heather's legs, her fingers easily pushing inside her.

Heather arched into Vanessa with a low moan. "God, you feel so good," she murmured into Vanessa's neck.

Vanessa moved further down Heather's body, taking a nipple into her mouth and teasing it with her tongue, darting, circling, and Heather clung to Vanessa, another orgasm ready to take over.

"Come for me," Vanessa said as she lifted her head to meet Heather's eyes. "I want you to come for me." She added another finger as she lowered her head to find Heather's lips, and the combination was overwhelming, sending shockwaves through

her entire body, her hips bucking, her free hand clutching the sheets as she shook.

“Fuck,” Heather groaned, her eyes slamming shut, her fingers digging into Vanessa’s hip as she held on. “Oh fuck,” she moaned, one last wave crashing into her before she collapsed against the sheets, her arms limp.

Heather wondered if she blacked out. She was aware of Vanessa’s soft lips on her chest and neck and the warmth of her body as she got comfortable beside her.

“That was... incredible,” Heather finally managed to say.

Vanessa met her gaze, lifting her fingers to caress Heather’s cheek as she spoke. “I feel like I should have known it would be like this,” she said with a smile tugging at her lips.

“It’s insane. Our chemistry,” Heather admitted, not even knowing what she was saying. She was probably delirious. She knew not to hope for anything more than this one night with Vanessa, but she couldn’t seem to filter her thoughts right now.

“And we’re only just getting started,” Vanessa said as she leaned in, kissing her slowly, and Heather sighed against her warm lips, falling even further into this unbelievable woman.

8

Vanessa woke up to the sound of the faucet in the bathroom running, and she didn't even have a chance to panic, the memories of last night flooding right back.

Vanessa closed her eyes, her hand on her forehead as she tried to keep herself from grinning.

She could safely say that last night had been one of the most surreal, exhilarating, and magical of her life. She knew it wasn't real. Not in the sense that this was the start of something. It wasn't. For so many reasons. But that didn't mean that she couldn't dwell on it, on the feeling of being wanted, of having such undeniable chemistry with someone.

Vanessa let out a sigh.

"Hey," Heather said, coming back into the room. "You're awake."

"Hmm." Vanessa's eyes fluttered open before she closed them again as she stretched her arms and legs, a dull ache in just about every muscle. "Is it late?" She half sat up, clutching the sheet to her bare chest, a move she always thought ridiculous in movies, but now that she was completely naked in front of someone who was padding around her hotel room in panties and the shirt she'd worn last night, it felt like the only sensible thing to do.

"No," Heather said as she sat on the edge of the bed. "It's just after eight, but your phone has been chiming for the last hour. I'm surprised it didn't wake you. Do you

want me to order some breakfast? Or would you prefer to go out?"

Vanessa reached for her phone on the nightstand to see three missed calls and about a dozen texts.

DANNY

Hey don't know if you saw my calls but there was a small incident this morning. Everyone's fine! Don't worry but we did have to call the fire department.

The alarms were going off and there was smoke everywhere but I managed to use the fire extinguisher. It was a small electrical fire apparently. Some frayed power cord that short-circuited?

I closed the shop. The smell of smoke and the lack of electricity made it an easy decision. I hope it was the right one!

I didn't want to bother you while you're away but I figured you'd need to know about this.

Like I said, everything is fine. The fire department checked everything out and they're recommending an inspection of the whole place.

"Is everything okay?"

Vanessa glanced up from her phone. Heather was staring at her with concern. "No. Well, yes. No one died. But there was a fire at my coffee shop."

"Shit. When? This morning?"

Vanessa nodded as she bit her lip, scrolling through the texts again. "I have to go

back. Get on the next train. I'm so sorry."

"No. It's fine. Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah. It sounds like no major damage was done, but there's a lot of clean up to do I imagine. And I'll need to get someone in to do an inspection. I was meant to stay another night."

"Hey..." Heather reached out, her hand warm on Vanessa's forearm as it slid down to her wrist, her palm gliding over Vanessa's until their fingers were interlaced. "It's fine. Really. Of course, I would have liked another night together. Assuming that..."

Vanessa smiled. "Yes. I was hoping you'd spend it with me. I was planning on asking you over breakfast if you had any plans for today, but I don't even think I should hang around that long."

Heather nodded. "Okay. I'll um... I'll get out of your way."

Vanessa's grip tightened on Heather's hand as she felt her start to pull away. "I have time to kiss you goodbye," Vanessa said, surprised by the huskiness in her own voice as she pulled Heather on top of her.

Heather settled onto Vanessa's lap, leaning down to find her lips, kissing her slowly at first, but it wasn't long before both of them were sighing, their breathing becoming a little ragged as the sheet fell away from Vanessa's chest, bunched up at her waist now.

Vanessa's fingers found the buttons on Heather's silky black top, opening them one by one until the fabric fell apart, and she could sneak a hand inside, her lips parting against Heather's as she blindly went to cup her breast.

A moan escaped Vanessa's lips when she met Heather's incredibly soft skin where she expected to find her lacy bra. Heather sighed into the kiss as Vanessa massaged her breast.

"Fuck," Heather panted as she pulled away, and Vanessa's hand fell to her lap. She visibly swallow as her eyes fluttered open. "I don't want to delay you," she said with a sigh.

"The thing is," Vanessa said, her hand sliding into Heather's underwear, "I think I know how to make you come fast."

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Heather sunk into her arms as Vanessa pushed two, then three fingers inside, her other hand lost in Heather's hair, gripping it as Heather rode her fingers.

It was hot. It was fast. And Vanessa couldn't ignore the way her heart fluttered in her chest as Heather came undone in front of her eyes.

Heather kissed her, her hips still gently rocking as she came down off the high of her orgasm, and Vanessa had no idea how she was supposed to say goodbye to this woman.

9

Heather could have got the subway home, but she ended up taking the long way home, almost dreading getting back to her place and having to face one of her roommates who more than likely knew she'd spent the night somewhere else. She was friends with both of them, and they meant well, but Heather wasn't ready to talk about what had happened last night.

Snow flurries danced to the ground as Heather took her time, stopping for a hot cup of coffee to carry around with her. She strolled into Washington Square Park, the cold winter air nipping at her cheeks, and found a seat on an empty bench. She took a long sip as she observed the people around her.

Despite the chill, the park was alive with activity. A musician played acoustic guitar, serenading a small crowd gathered on the sidewalk. His worn, scuffed guitar case lay open at his feet, a few crumpled dollar bills and coins visible inside.

A jogger zipped past, his breath visible in small white puffs with each exhale. He had headphones on, seemingly oblivious to the music as he maintained a steady pace along the path. Across the way, a vendor sold hot pretzels and coffee from his cart, the aroma wafting through the brisk air.

Heather soaked in the atmosphere, but her mind kept wandering back to the night before. She knew she shouldn't have let last night happen. She knew there was almost no chance that she'd see her again.

Heather slid her phone out of her coat pocket, opening up her contacts. She scrolled down to the very bottom. There was Vanessa's number.

Heather opened up her messages. She didn't know why she'd gotten her number. They both knew that last night was a one-time thing, but Heather somehow felt better knowing that they had each other's number. Things change. People move.

Heather exhaled, releasing a cloud of white smoke into the air. She couldn't hope that Vanessa would get in touch with her the next time she was in the city. That was just not a healthy approach no matter how much Heather would love it to happen. She couldn't expect it to.

But at the same time, it was so hard to file that kind of night away, to know that it was a dead end, that there was no hope for anything more, because Heather knew she'd never experienced anything like that before.

It wasn't entirely crazy to think that they could make it work, but there was an understanding from the start last night that this wasn't going anywhere. Vanessa would probably never leave her hometown and her business, and long distance relationships never really worked, not that Heather had seen.

There was the age difference too. She obviously had no problem with it, but Vanessa

definitely did.

Heather shook her head as she pushed all those thoughts away. No point even going there. Heather had been the one to ask for her number, and maybe Vanessa was just being polite when she gave her hers, knowing that she'd never use it. If Heather hadn't asked, would Vanessa have just said goodbye?

Heather took a sip of coffee. Probably.

She started texting Megan, because Heather knew she shouldn't spend the day alone. She'd just keep going in circles when what she really needed was someone to talk some sense into her.

HEATHER

Hey. Hope last night went well. Breakfast?

MEGAN

How about lunch? 12:30?

HEATHER

Sure. Urban Vine?

MEGAN

See you then

Left alone with her thoughts again, it was impossible for Heather not to think about last night. If she'd thought the bar was intense...

Heather leaned her head back, looking up at the gray sky, a snowflake landing on her forehead. She closed her eyes and images of Vanessa's perfect body underneath her, her head thrown back, her fingers digging into Heather's arm as she came filled her mind.

"Fuck it," Heather said as she pushed herself off the bench and kept walking.

She had to go home and shower before she met Megan. And more importantly, change out of the clothes that she was wearing, because there was no way that Megan wouldn't spot her work clothes from yesterday.

Vanessa's black leather weekender was at her feet as she scanned the streams of people coming and going through Penn Station. The rumble of rolling luggage and purposeful footfalls echoed off the vaulted ceilings and tall marble pillars.

Vanessa observed the morning commuters weaving between each other, absorbed in their phones or clutching travel mugs. She caught snippets of conversations and announcements over the station's speaker system. It wasn't long before she saw her niece coming towards her, two cups of coffee in hand.

Vanessa stood up as she greeted her, taking one of the cups from her. "Thank you for rearranging."

"No problem," Megan said, tucking a lock of brown hair behind her ear. She looked tired, and Vanessa wondered if she'd woken her up when she called her after Heather had left her hotel room just before nine.

Vanessa quickly pushed any thoughts of Heather out of her mind, focusing on her sister's daughter as she took a seat beside her.

"And thank you for this," Vanessa said, taking a sip, recognizing the logo on the side of the cup as Megan had gotten closer.

"I know you're coffee snob, so why wouldn't I bring you the best?"

"I did not plan ahead." Vanessa cradled the takeaway cup. "I just packed my bags,

checked out, and got here as fast as I could without even checking the train times.”

“When is your train?”

“Less than thirty minutes.”

“So, what happened?” Megan asked. “A fire?”

“Not a full-blown fire, but enough to cause smoke damage. I know my manager was stressed out, mainly because I wasn’t there, I’d imagine, but at the end of the day, no one was hurt. No serious damage was done. It’s all fixable.”

“It’s shit timing though. It’s been, what, five or six months since you’ve come into the city. And your trip got cut short.”

Vanessa shrugged. She’d only seen Megan two weeks ago when she was home for Christmas, but it was true. It had been a long time since she’d gotten away for a weekend. She’d gone to Philadelphia for her last two trips, just to change things up.

Vanessa had another sip of coffee. “I was hoping I’d get to meet your girlfriend.”

Megan coughed, covering her mouth. “Sorry. Swallowed wrong.” She cleared her throat. “No, she’s busy. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Anyone special? I meant to ask you over the holidays.”

Vanessa sighed.

“I can’t tell if that’s good or bad,” Megan said with a lop-sided smile.

“Me neither.” Vanessa pressed her lips together for a second. “I met someone but it’s... It’s just not practical. So... But that’s okay.” She forced herself to smile. “Tell me about work,” she said, desperate for a subject change.

She hadn’t even had a chance to process last night. She’d have the next four hours to do that, not that she’d suddenly stop thinking about it when she got home, although the problems at the coffee shop would keep her busy for the next few days.

“Work is hectic,” Megan said. “Always is. But I love it.”

“That’s good. Isn’t that where you met your girlfriend? What was her name again?”

Megan took another sip of coffee before she looked past Vanessa, her eyes focused on something. “I think they’re calling your train.”

Vanessa glanced over her shoulder, following Megan’s gaze to the departure board. Her train was listed as ‘boarding’ which meant she had about ten minutes before she really needed to head to the platform.

“You’re trying to change the subject,” Vanessa said, turning back to her niece.

Megan shook her head, avoiding eye contact as she took another sip of coffee. “No, I just...”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me about her if you don’t want to.” Vanessa studied Megan’s face, noticing the faint blush in her cheeks. She wondered if there was trouble in paradise or if Megan was just a private person when it came to relationships. She’d never brought anyone home for Christmas or the Fourth of July.

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“Thanks,” Megan mumbled.

Vanessa decided not to push it. “I’m sure I’ll meet her at the vow renewal ceremony.”

Megan’s eyes widened for just a second, almost as if she’d forgotten. “Yeah.”

“Well, I’m happy for you, regardless,” Vanessa said sincerely. “You deserve to have someone special in your life.”

Megan nodded, flashing a brief, tight-lipped smile. “What about you and...this woman you met?” she asked, deftly steering the subject back to Vanessa’s love life. Or lack thereof. “What makes it not practical?”

Vanessa hesitated, debating how much to disclose. She’d always had a good relationship with Megan, maybe because they were the only gay members of their family, but Vanessa liked to think that it was more than that, that they clicked. Megan was so like her mother, and Vanessa had all the time in the world for her niece, but at the same time she didn’t need to know about last night.

“It’s...complicated,” Vanessa began slowly. “We’re in very different places in life. Let’s just say that.”

Megan raised an eyebrow. “Different places how?”

The boarding announcement for Vanessa’s train sounded over the loudspeaker. She glanced at the departure board again.

“We’re in literal different places,” she said, standing up. “I’ve tried long-distance before, and it just doesn’t work. Not for me.”

Megan stood up, and they hugged. “You’ll find someone.”

Vanessa nodded as she pulled away. “If I don’t see you before then, I’ll see you at the ceremony.”

“I hope my mother is giving you as many jobs as she’s given me,” Megan said with a laugh.

“Nope.” Vanessa smiled. “Not one. I had all those jobs the first time.” With a final wave, Vanessa turned and headed for her train.

Finding her seat, she stowed her bag and settled in for the journey home. As the train slowly pulled out of the station, Vanessa’s thoughts returned to the night before. To when she’d laid eyes on Heather at the wine bar.

In that moment, wishing that this beautiful woman would come over and talk to her, Vanessa would have never imagined that they’d end up sleeping together.

Vanessa had no problem saying goodnight to a woman she’d kissed at a bar. More often than not she did, but there was just something about Heather, that right from the start, it was like they both knew. It was inevitable.

She closed her eyes, flashes of last night instantly playing in her head. She could still feel the warmth of Heather’s hand on her neck as she’d kissed her or the delicate touch of her fingers as they’d traced a line up the inside of her thigh.

Last night had everything. There were moments of intensity, of their lips crashing together, or their orgasms coming quick and fast, but as the night wore on, things

slowed, their releases more drawn out, their kisses more intimate.

With a deep sigh, Vanessa leaned her head against the window. How was she ever going to forget about Heather?

11

Heather checked her phone as she stood outside Urban Vine. 11:57am. Before she could decide whether or not to go inside and grab a seat, Megan came into view, her signature red beanie hat standing out, and Heather couldn't help but smile as they hugged.

"Hey," Megan said, her voice warm.

"How was last night?" Heather asked.

Megan dropped her head onto Heather's shoulder before she pulled away. "Ugh."

"That bad?"

"Worse, actually."

Heather followed Megan inside Urban Vine. The café was one of their favorites, with its cozy atmosphere and delicious food. They found a booth by the window, and Heather slid in across from Megan, taking in the familiar scents of coffee and freshly baked pastries.

They both ordered coffee and brunch.

"So what happened?" Heather asked as they handed the waitress their menus.

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“So this was the woman that I’ve been messaging for three, maybe four months now, but we’d never met.”

“Yeah. The one you have a bunch of stuff in common with.”

Megan nodded. “Yeah, and she was so easy to talk to. I thought my biggest concern would be that we were never going to be anything more than friends.”

“And it wasn’t?”

“Nope. So, you know how most people use the best photo they have as their profile picture? Like, it’s too good. It’s from a wedding where they had someone do their makeup or from ten years ago when they were still in college. And then it’s hard not to be a little disappointed when the person you meet doesn’t look at all like that.”

“Yeah,” Heather agreed, even though she had no idea. Although that was just another reason to never try online dating.

“Well, this was the opposite. Don’t get me wrong. Her profile picture was good. But in person? Oh my god.”

“Beautiful?”

“Stunning,” Megan said, pressing her lips together. “Just stunning.”

“So what went wrong?”

“Nothing for the first two hours. It was as close as I’ve ever experienced to a perfect date. We went to a bar that we’d both been to before. Really casual. The conversation flowed. I should have known it was too good to be true.”

“What happened?”

“A man came up behind her and put his hand around her waist while we were up at the bar, and I was ready to step in and let this guy know that she wasn’t interested.”

“Oh no.” Heather could sense where this was going. “Please tell me you didn’t get thrown out.”

“No. I didn’t get thrown out. There were no words had or threats made, because she turned around and put her arms around his shoulders and kissed him.”

“What?” Heather’s jaw dropped.

“She was recruiting me.”

“As in...”

“For a throuple. Not even a random threesome. That’s why we’d been messaging for so long. She really thought we had a connection. And we did.”

“Did she not read your profile? That you’re only interested in women?”

Megan sighed. “I don’t know. I still can’t believe that happened. That is not at all how I imagined my night going.”

“Wow.”

“Anyway, enough about me. What did you get up to last night?”

Heather sucked in a breath, a smile threatening to take over as she tried to gather her thoughts.

“Oh. I’m guessing you had a much better night than I did,” Megan said with a smirk.

Heather ran a hand through her hair. “I met this amazing woman last night.” She didn’t even know what to say after that. As close of a friend as Megan was, she wasn’t going to go into the details of last night with her. It just didn’t feel right.

“And?”

“And, for once, I know that it’s not going to work out, and I’m not going to delude myself into thinking that it’s ever going to.”

“What? That’s very cryptic. Is she married?”

“No.”

“In the closet?”

“I don’t think so.” Heather shrugged. “It’s just not going to work.”

“Are you feeling okay? This is no not like you.”

Heather allowed herself a wry smile. “No. Not really. But it’s just the reality of the situation, and for once, I’m not going to fight it.”

“Why are we so unlucky?”

“At this rate, we’ll have to sign one of those pacts where if we’re both single by the time we’re forty...”

“Oh god.” Megan put her head in her hands.

“Relax, I’m not being serious.” This was a dramatic reaction. “I feel like I should be offended.”

Megan’s hand was still on her forehead. “No. Shit. I meant to tell you this, and then work was so busy, and I don’t know how, but... Please don’t hate me.”

“Why would I hate you?” Heather’s pulse picked up speed, her mind trying to fill in the gaps. What would have Megan this worried? Hopefully, it wasn’t anything serious, like something criminal.

“So, when I went home for Christmas, I ended up gushing about you when my

parents asked about work. It was at the dinner table with all my family, and my mom completely misunderstood what I was saying and jumped to the conclusion that you were my girlfriend and not my best friend.”

Heather laughed softly. “Okay. That’s not a big deal.”

“It gets worse.” Megan ran her fingertips over her eyebrow. “I didn’t get a chance to correct her, because the topic of conversation moved on, and I didn’t want to tap my wineglass with my spoon and get everyone’s attention to set the record straight, that I am, in fact, very single. They’re all so settled and put together. My aunt’s paved the way for me. She came out when I was a kid, so I guess I should be thankful that I’m not worried about disappointing my parents or anything. My mom was so happy when she thought that you were my girlfriend.”

“Okay, but I’m still not getting what the problem is. Just tell them the next time you’re home that it didn’t work out.”

“Yeah,” Megan said with a sigh. “That’s the problem. The next time I’m home is for my parents’ vow renewal ceremony. And they think you’re coming. I’ve seen the seating chart. Your name is there. Beside mine.”

“Okay, so I play the part of your girlfriend for a weekend and then in a few weeks you tell them it didn’t work out.”

“You’d do that for me?” Megan asked, her eyes wide.

“Yeah. It’s not like I have a real girlfriend to worry about.”

“Oh my god, Heather, you have no idea. I think of it randomly, after a call from my mother or in the middle of the night, that I need to fix this problem. Either humiliate myself by coming clean or asking you to do this for me. I really didn’t want to ask,

but it's come up so fast."

"When is the ceremony?"

"In six weeks. The end of February."

"Then we'll need to figure out what we're going to wear," Heather said as the waitress delivered their food.

12

Vanessa leaned back in her office chair, needing a break from staring at her computer screen for the last two hours. In the month since the fire, they'd only had to close for the day that Vanessa had been in New York City. She'd rushed back and got everything sorted with the fire department and the electrician, making repairs over the next few days and then arranging for fire training for all of her staff.

She had to look at the positives. No one had been hurt, and her coffee shop was now safer than ever. She'd also given the shop a new look, painting it the turquoise and grays she'd been thinking about for a while now.

Vanessa opened the next email she had to reply to when there was a knock at the door. "Come in."

Danny, her manager, appeared, holding a brown paper bag, an oil stain forming in the bottom corner. "Special delivery," he said with a grin.

"Thank you." Vanessa's stomach rumbled as she caught the whiff of garlic and what she hoped was some kind of pasta dish rather than a sub or fish. She'd recognized the new Italian restaurant's logo as soon as Danny came in. "But you know there's nothing else to promote you to," she said with a smile as she cleared some space on

her desk.

Danny had been with her for almost five years now, moving up from cleaner to barista to manager in the last year when her previous one left. “Oh, I didn’t order this,” he said as he left the bag down on her desk. “Gabriella stopped by. I would have sent her back here, but I knew you’d kill me.”

“Why?” Vanessa said, resisting the urge to open the bag and find out what was inside.

“Because...”

“Because?”

“You’re having a very casual day...” His gaze lingered on her hair, then her clothes, and finally on her makeup free face. “Nothing wrong with that,” he said, holding his hands up, “But I figured you wouldn’t want Gabriella back here today.”

“You know I’m not interested in her, right? I feel like I’ve told you that before. And I don’t even think she’s really interested in me. She’s just friendly, and her restaurant isn’t even three months old. She’s networking. Getting all the other local businesses to stop by for lunch or dinner after work.”

“Oh no,” Danny said with a smirk. “She’s interested. You should have seen her face drop when I said that you were busy and that I’d bring it to you.” His eyes suddenly grew wide. “You should take her to your sister’s vow renewal ceremony. You’ll need a date.”

“No.” Vanessa was already shaking her head. “No. Absolutely not. Too complicated. My sister would jump at the idea that we were dating. I could never show up with someone I wasn’t actually seeing. She’s almost as bad as you are now that I think about it. Always trying to set me up with someone. If she thinks I’m dating Gabriella, that will be all I hear for the next year. At least.”

“Yeah, but you could be dating her,” Danny said. “You can’t just ignore when a beautiful, single, gay woman in her early forties, if I had to guess, walks into our small town. She opened a business, which means she’s here to stay. It’s practically

fate.”

Vanessa sighed. “I’m going to strongly disagree. Now, get back to work,” she said with a smile, and Danny left without another word, although she couldn’t miss the smile he was trying to hide.

Vanessa opened the paper bag and lifted the lid off the container, her mouth watering at the sight of the shrimp pasta dish. The aroma of garlic and fresh herbs wafted up to her nose, making her stomach grumble with anticipation.

She picked up her fork and carefully twirled a strand of spaghetti around it, bringing it up to her mouth. The pasta was perfectly al dente, the sauce rich and flavorful. The shrimp were tender and succulent, their natural sweetness complementing the savory sauce.

Vanessa closed her eyes, savoring the taste of the dish. As she ate, Vanessa couldn’t help but think about Gabriella. She was undeniably beautiful, with her dark hair, caramel brown eyes, and flawless complexion. She was probably just a few years younger than her, a business owner too. She had a warmth and charisma that was infectious, yet Vanessa felt nothing.

In the week after she’d come back from New York, Vanessa had allowed herself to daydream about Heather. All she needed was just a few seconds of idle time, and Vanessa was right back in that wine bar, replaying how the night had unfolded.

At night, when she couldn’t sleep, Vanessa couldn’t keep the memories of that night away. The feeling of Heather’s hands moving up her thighs, her fingers threading through Vanessa’s hair, the way Heather’s lips had kissed her so thoroughly.

But for the last three weeks, Vanessa had been trying to forget about her, and she didn’t know how she was still thinking about Heather a month later. This was not

normal.

A few days ago, she'd come out of this office to see a woman with long, light brown hair with golden highlights, sitting with her back to Vanessa, looking out the window, and for a whole three seconds, Vanessa had really thought that it was Heather, which made no sense.

Heather knew nothing about her. Not anything that she could have used to track her down. Heather didn't know her last name, the name of this town, or the name of her coffee shop.

Vanessa finished her pasta and took out her phone, scrolling through her contacts until she reached Heather's name. Vanessa knew that they parted ways with no expectations of meeting again, but when Heather asked for her number, she'd left a little bit of hope that maybe, at some point, Heather would text her.

Maybe if Vanessa went back to the city again, she could be the one to get in touch with Heather.

But what would that achieve?

Other than another amazing night together.

Danny was right. Gabriella was all of the things that she was looking for. Maybe, in time, she would feel something.

Vanessa shook her head. She almost wished she'd taken a selfie with Heather. Right now, she'd love to have a photo to look at, but she was in the same position as Heather. Vanessa didn't know her last name or where she worked. The only way she was ever going to see Heather again was if she reached out and sent her a text.

Vanessa opened the messaging app, typing and deleting her words just as fast.

She exhaled, putting her phone away before she did something she might regret.

There had to be a reason that Heather hadn't gotten in touch. Maybe, she met someone. She was the one who wanted Vanessa's number. If Heather wanted to see her again, she would have contacted her.

So she must not want to.

Which meant that Vanessa had to move on.

13

"How are we late?" Megan asked as she slammed the driver's side door shut, pulling open the back door to get out her heels, barely sitting down for a second to put them on.

"Because we didn't factor in traffic?" Heather suggested as she grabbed her black winter coat from the backseat and slid it on.

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They took one of the last free parking spaces at the hotel where Megan's parents' rehearsal dinner had started about ten minutes ago, and now they had a long walk ahead of them.

"I thought you said your family were laidback," Heather said as she linked arms with Megan on their way to the hotel.

"They are, but I hate being late." Megan exhaled, a puff of white smoke evaporating into the night air. "Sorry for complaining. Thank you for doing this. Seriously. You have no idea. I know it's crazy, but having my parents think that I'm happy and in love is better for me right now than admitting that I wasn't seeing anyone. I promise, I'll break up with you soon."

Heather smiled, bumping lightly against her. "No rush there. Not like I have women chasing after me. So, one last time. Your mom's name is Anna. Your dad's name is Robert, but he likes Bob?"

"Yes. And there's too many other names to remember, so I'm not going to list out my mom's five siblings or my dad's five. And I have three of my four grandparents still alive. They're well into their eighties, but they're doing well considering."

"And all of them are here? Tonight?"

"Yep. And all the cousins. Just remember my parents' names, and you'll be fine."

Heather pulled open the door for Megan. "So just look at you lovingly and dance with you at the reception?"

“Yeah. That’s pretty much it.”

They followed the signs for the ballroom where Megan knew the dinner was happening, and right before she pushed open the door, Heather reached for Megan’s hand.

Megan smiled at her as they walked through the door. “I have a feeling that you’re going to be good at this. Potentially too good. My mom’s going to be devastated when I tell her that I had to dump you.”

Heather grinned. “What if I dump you first?”

“Hmm. That’s probably more realistic. I’ll have to explain your cougar tendencies. Surely, the woman you’ll leave me for will be twice my age.”

“Okay,” Heather said with a laugh. “Once again, you’re exaggerating.”

Heather could feel the warmth of Megan’s hand in hers as they walked into the crowded ballroom. The loud hum of conversation seemed to dip for a moment as all eyes turned their way. Heather felt her cheeks flush, suddenly self-conscious at the attention, the reality of this hitting her all at once.

The ballroom was lit by crystal chandeliers, casting a soft glow over the space. Two long banquette tables were covered with white linen cloths, and servers in crisp white shirts moved up and down the tables, topping up water glasses and pouring wine.

Near the head table, Heather spotted a woman who looked just like an older version of Megan. Her dark hair was streaked with gray and pulled up in an elegant twist. As they approached, Megan’s mom turned, her face lighting up.

“Megan! There you are, sweetheart!” she exclaimed, immediately pulling Megan in

for a tight hug. “We were starting to worry.”

“I know, I’m so sorry,” Megan said, returning the embrace. “Traffic was awful coming from the city.”

Megan’s mom pulled back, holding her daughter by the shoulders. “Well, you’re here now, that’s all that matters.” Her gaze shifted to Heather. “And you must be Heather!”

Before Heather could react, she found herself wrapped in a warm, floral-scented hug.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you!” Megan’s mom said. “We’ve heard so many wonderful things.”

Heather was surprised by the genuine warmth of the greeting. She had expected polite pleasantries, not this enthusiastic welcome.

“It’s wonderful to meet you too, uh Mrs—“ Heather said.

“Oh please, call me Anna!”

Megan’s dad stepped forward next, giving Heather’s hand a firm shake. His eyes crinkled as he smiled.

“Bob,” he introduced himself simply. “We’re thrilled you could join us this weekend.”

Heather was struck by a twinge of guilt. She hadn’t really thought this through, about how it would feel to lie to Megan’s family like this.

“I’m so happy to be here,” Heather said, the words flowing easily. “This all looks

amazing, you must be so excited.”

“Oh we are!” Anna said, linking her arm through Bob’s. “Forty years married, can you believe it?”

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Bob smiled adoringly at his wife. “Best forty years of my life.”

Anna leaned up and kissed his cheek. Heather couldn’t help but feel a pang of longing, wondering if she’d ever find that one day.

“Well come on you two, let’s get you seated so you can eat!” Anna said, ushering them towards their seats.

Heather let Megan lead her to two empty seats near the middle of one of the long banquet tables, past a few couples in their thirties, Megan’s older brothers she assumed. Megan pulled out a chair and Heather took off her coat, draping it over the back of her chair before taking the seat beside her, smoothing her napkin over her lap.

A server appeared and began filling their water glasses. She glanced around the table, taking in the faces of Megan’s extended family members. Just as she took in the last seats at the second table her eyes landed on the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen.

It was a good thing she was sitting because Heather felt like the floor had fallen out from under her as her eyes locked with Vanessa’s. She could feel the blood draining from her face, her palms sweaty as she fiddled with her napkin under the table.

Vanessa had been staring straight at her. She must have saw Heather come in.

Oh god.

Heather reached for her glass of water, nearly knocking it over in the process.

Vanessa saw her coming in, holding hands with Megan. Right now, whether Vanessa had any interest in her at all, she thought that her and Megan were a couple.

Megan looked over at her, concern etched across her face. “You okay?” she asked softly so that only Heather could hear her. “You’ve gone quiet.”

Heather took a deep breath, forcing herself to focus on the situation at hand. “Yeah,” she said, clearing her throat. “Just, um, nervous, I guess.” She snuck a glance over at Vanessa, who was now looking away, chatting with the woman beside her.

Heather inhaled a slow, deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. She took another drink of water. Vanessa was either a family friend, a neighbor, or maybe Megan’s parents were regular customers at her coffee shop.

Okay, that last one was wishful thinking.

“There’s a lot of people here for a rehearsal dinner,” Heather said a few minutes later after she’d ordered.

“Yeah. About one hundred. But that’s just how big our family is. Everybody is married and has kids. Well, except my aunt. The guest list for Sunday is around one hundred and sixty, I think, with all their friends and people they’ve worked with.”

“So this is all your family?” Heather asked, taking another look around the room.

“Yep. That’s why I didn’t even both trying to tell you everyone’s names. I’ll introduce you to my brothers and their families after dinner.”

Heather couldn’t shake the feeling that Vanessa’s eyes were on her, even though she appeared to be engaged in conversation with someone else, and while she managed to keep the question that was on her lips to herself for a whole five minutes, she

couldn't any longer.

"So, which one is your gay aunt?" Heather asked, already knowing the answer. Two women were sitting either side of Vanessa, and there were no kids at that end of the table.

"Across from us at the other table. Dark hair and a black dress? Oh, you can see her better now that she's standing up. That's my aunt Vanessa."

Heather bit the inside of her cheek as she closed her eyes for a second. "Cool," she managed to say, but her voice sounded funny, her ears ringing. When she opened them again, Vanessa pushed through the door they'd come in earlier that led back to the lobby.

The waiter arrived, offering more water and glasses of wine to the table. Heather took a gulp of wine, trying to calm her nerves as she debated doing something potentially stupid.

Vanessa had to know that this wasn't real. The longer she went on thinking that it was, the more she was going to hate Heather.

"I'm just going to go find the restroom," Heather said, pushing her chair back.

14

Vanessa didn't know where she was going, but she knew she needed air, space. At the very least, away from Heather. Vanessa strode through the lobby which was quiet and outside, the cold air hitting her, but she needed it. She felt hot, clammy, and like she wanted to punch something.

For the last ten minutes, she'd tried to process what was happening in front of her.

She'd noticed Megan walking in, curious to see who this girlfriend was that Megan had been gushing about during Christmas dinner, and Vanessa couldn't remember ever being more shocked than in that moment as she watched Heather walking hand in hand with Megan over to their table and meet Anna and Bob for what looked like the first time.

Initially, Vanessa had thought that she must be seeing things, but as her eyes focused on Heather from across the room, she knew it was her, and then her mind kicked into overdrive, trying to figure out how this had happened.

Heather had been the one to approach her at that wine bar, and not once during their night together did she show any signs of doubt about what they were doing.

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Vanessa left out a huge sigh as she stood alone outside the hotel, a chill running through her. She registered the sound of the door opening and closing behind her, but she wasn't in the mood to talk to any of her family right now. She knew she didn't have much longer out here to process her thoughts. Dinner would be served in the next few minutes.

"We need to talk."

Vanessa closed her eyes as she inhaled a shaky breath. When she opened them, Heather was standing in front of her, her blue eyes even more captivating than she had remembered.

"Do we?" Vanessa asked, her voice giving away her. She could hear the anger, the disappointment, the disbelief in just those two words.

Vanessa shook her head and turned to go back inside when she felt the warmth of Heather's hand as she grabbed a hold of her wrist.

"Yes," Heather said with a sigh. "We do."

When Vanessa didn't try to pull her arm away, Heather released her grip, and Vanessa bit the inside of her cheek as she turned back to face her. "What's there to say? Maybe it's my fault for assuming that you were single. I should have asked, straight away, at the wine bar, before anything happened. I hate cheating. I don't get it. But for your girlfriend to be my niece?" Vanessa shook her head again. "I can't. There's nothing to talk about. Forget that night ever happened, and I hope you're not going to break Megan's heart. She is so kind, caring. And I can't believe you would

do that to her.”

Vanessa turned and left without giving a chance for Heather to respond. She couldn't listen to whatever excuse Heather was going to give her.

“Vanessa...”

She didn't look back as she headed inside, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. She went into the restroom and stared at her reflection in the mirror.

A month ago, she thought she might be having some kind of mid-life crisis, spending the night with someone so much younger than her, but it turns out that their age difference was the least of her problems.

When Heather kissed her goodbye that morning, when they couldn't keep their hands off each other, Vanessa had felt alive for the first time in years. This breathtaking woman wanted her.

And there Vanessa was just two hours later, telling her niece that she had met someone, but that she didn't think it would work out.

“Got that right,” Vanessa said with a wry smile as she left the restroom and tried to but on a brave face.

Not only did she have to get through this dinner with Heather in her line of sight, but she'd have to get through this entire weekend, completely torn. She wanted to be happy for Megan. She had been since her niece had mentioned that she'd met someone, but it was impossible to now.

And as she sat down, accidentally catching Heather's gaze again, Vanessa hated to admit it, but there was no point denying it.

However wrong it was, she was still attracted to this woman.

15

Heather cradled her second cup of coffee. She was the last one up, and Megan's parents were already getting ready to go skiing.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Heather asked after she finished her cream cheese bagel.

"No. Are you kidding? I know you're not a huge fan of skiing. It's a family tradition. Any time some of us are together, and we can still get on the slopes, we're gone."

"I can ski. I'm just not very good at it," Heather said, taking a sip of coffee. "And I don't want to make a fool of myself in front of your family. Plus, I'm exhausted."

"Hm. I actually went back up to check on you."

"Sleeping til ten-thirty on a Saturday is not that late. Come on."

Heather didn't tell her that she'd spent all night tossing and turning, replaying her conversation with Vanessa over and over in her head, wondering how she'd managed to let Vanessa go without explaining what was going on.

"It's fine. All of it," Megan said as she got up. "I'm just glad you're here." She lowered her voice. "Seriously. You have no idea how much easier this weekend is for me, already."

Heather nodded, giving her friend a hint of a smile. "It almost feels like you might owe me after this."

“Oh definitely. Start making your list of demands.”

“Plural?” Heather’s smile turned into a grin.

“Don’t get too crazy. But yes, I am aware of how big of an ask this whole weekend is.” She glanced towards the door. “I better get going.”

“Enjoy your day.”

“You won’t be bored?”

Heather shook her head. “Na. I’m in the middle of a good book, so I just need to find some cozy bar to read it in. Maybe one with a fireplace?”

“There’s no fireplace, but you should check out my aunt’s coffee shop. It’s just off the square. Teal front. You can’t miss it.”

Heather pressed her lips together. “Thanks.”

“Okay. We won’t be out there too long. We need time to get ready for dinner.”

“See you later,” Heather called after her as Megan left.

Anna and Bob came into the kitchen a few minutes later to say goodbye, that guilty feeling settling in her chest once again. Everyone Heather had met so far had been so nice. Megan’s brothers and their partners. But Heather got it now. Everyone was settled and happy, and she could see how Megan might be feeling the pressure to bring someone home.

Vanessa wasn’t with anyone though.

The thought had crossed her mind more than once in the last month. What if Vanessa had met someone? She never once thought that Vanessa might have someone back home that she’d cheated on Heather with, and that realization made her stomach do

another somersault.

What must Vanessa think of her right now?

Heather exhaled as she got up and put her mug in the dishwasher. She had to figure out a way to tell Vanessa later, assuming that she was coming to this dinner.

She could stop by the coffee shop like Megan suggested, but Heather had a gut feeling that it was a bad idea. Maybe she was out skiing too and wouldn't be there anyway.

Heather climbed the stairs to Megan's old bedroom. She needed to remember to act the part of Megan's loving girlfriend later, because she nearly put her foot in it last night. She almost asked Anna where she was staying? Obviously, she would be staying with Megan.

What was she even going to say when she saw Vanessa again? That was probably what she was going to spend the day doing. Coming up with the right words to say to Vanessa when she finally had the opportunity to talk to her.

She just had to hope that she'd have a chance alone with Vanessa again tonight.

16

Vanessa walked into her sister's home, inhaling the enticing scent of garlic and herbs that filled the air as she shrugged off her coat and placed her keys in the bowl on the narrow wooden table in the hallway. The sound of lively chatter, clinking glasses, and infectious laughter emanated from the kitchen and dining room. With twelve cars parked outside, she knew she was one of the last of her family to arrive at Anna's.

Vanessa couldn't make it skiing today because two of her employees had called in

sick, and Saturdays were always so busy. She didn't mind too much. At the moment, avoiding spending any additional time with Heather was her main focus, so she happily typed out a message to Anna that morning telling her she couldn't make it.

Vanessa paused at the entrance of the kitchen, running her fingers through her long black hair before she entered the room, and Anna spotted her instantly, coming over and wrapping her arms around her. It was only six o'clock, but if Vanessa had to guess, she'd say her older sister was two if not three glasses of wine in.

"You just missed Gabriella," Anna said as she pulled away. "She was asking for you."

Vanessa resisted the urge to look around and find Heather. She held Anna's gaze until Megan joined them.

"Hey," Megan said, handing Vanessa a glass of red wine. "Who's Gabriella?"

"Thanks," Vanessa said as she took a drink.

"The owner of the Italian all of this food came from," Anna said glancing behind her to where there were trays of food set up like a buffet. Vanessa's nephews were lining up, scooping pasta and meatballs onto their plates. She thought she caught a flash of light brown hair in the corner of her eye, but Vanessa returned her attention to her sister.

"Oh," Megan said with a nod. "I saw the Pride flag outside."

"Well then, maybe," Anna said looking at Megan, "You can tell your aunt to stop being so picky and give the woman a chance."

"You turned her down?" Megan asked Vanessa.

“No.” Vanessa threw daggers at her sister. “She hasn’t even asked me out.”

Anna added, “She’s a beautiful woman.”

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“I never said she wasn’t,” Vanessa said, trying to keep the frustration out of her voice. This was Anna and Bob’s weekend, and as difficult a time as Vanessa was having right now, she wasn’t going to let her own problems affect Anna’s.

“Well, the food is delicious.”

Vanessa knew who had said it before her eyes landed on her.

“The sauce is to die for,” Heather continued as stood beside Megan with a plate of pasta and a few garlic knots.

Vanessa was grateful for the change of subject even if it meant looking directly at Heather. She couldn’t deny how amazing she’d looked that night at the wine bar, in her smart business attire, and yesterday, seeing her in a blue dress just about floored Vanessa, but there was something about seeing Heather wearing jeans and a cozy looking brown and navy flannel top that somehow was the most attractive of all, her hair tumbling over her shoulders, her blue eyes vibrant.

“Then let’s eat,” Vanessa said.

17

It was nearly ten o’clock, and most of Megan’s family had left. Heather spent the evening turning down glasses of wine from both Megan and her mother. Mainly she didn’t want to be hungover tomorrow, but if she was being completely honest, it was because she didn’t trust herself around Vanessa. The way Vanessa’s eyes had met hers across the room all evening, the heat that flashed in them before she quickly

looked away—Heather couldn't deny the connection they had, even if Vanessa's gaze held some mix of anger and resentment.

Heather had struggled all night to act normal around Vanessa when she was sober. There was no way that she could have if she was drunk.

Now, it was just Megan, her parents, Vanessa, and Heather left, sitting in the living room, the fire crackling. It would have been a really enjoyable evening if Heather hadn't been so in her head. Megan's parents were so kind, and Heather had loved hearing some funny stories from Megan's childhood. It was the kind of family Heather wished she had, and apparently, feeling guilty was going to be a theme for her this weekend.

Heather's eyes followed Vanessa as she disappeared into the kitchen, the memory of running her hand through her glossy, black hair sending a jolt of longing through her. Heather's skipped a beat as she seriously debated following her. She glanced at Megan, who was engrossed in a conversation with her parents, before rising from her seat and making her way towards the kitchen.

Vanessa stood at the counter, her back to Heather, a glass of wine in hand. The sight of her made Heather's breath catch in her throat, and she paused at the doorway, unsure of how to proceed as the door fell shut behind her. Vanessa finished her wine and left the glass in the sink before turning around.

"You seem tense," Vanessa said, her voice so low it was almost a whisper, but it carried a hint of something that made Heather's skin tingle.

"I'm fine," Heather replied, trying to sound more confident than she felt. She took a step forward, her eyes fixed on Vanessa's profile. "Just a bit overwhelmed, I guess."

"Meeting the family is always a bit of a challenge," Vanessa said, a sad smile barely

curving her lips, “No matter who welcoming they are.”

Heather found the courage to fully enter the room, still not entirely sure what she was going to say, but she had to tell Vanessa the truth. “Everyone has been so kind, but I have to?—“

The door opened, and Heather jumped, her heart hammering in her chest now. She was already so on edge, knowing that when she finally told Vanessa the truth, it didn’t necessarily mean that they were going to be on good terms. Vanessa could hate her even more than she probably already did, but that chance to tell her had just slipped through Heather’s fingers once again.

If Anna noticed any tension in the room, she didn’t show it. She went straight for the bottle of wine on the counter. “This is the last one,” she said, holding up her hand as she topped up her glass, as if she was expecting Vanessa to say something. “Besides, the ceremony isn’t until the afternoon. Do either of you want a refill?” she asked, looking from Vanessa to Heather.

“No,” Heather said. “I’m good. Thanks.”

“No. I’m going to go,” Vanessa said.

“What? I thought you were going to stay here tonight. You can’t drive.”

“I’ll call someone.” Vanessa waved her off. “It’ll be fine.”

“I can drop you home,” Heather said without thinking, and she could feel her cheeks flushing as both women looked at her. “I haven’t been drinking,” she added, just in case they hadn’t noticed.

“Oh, that’s perfect then,” Anna said before Vanessa had a chance to say something.

She went over to Vanessa and gave her a hug. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Heather sucked in a breath as she slipped out of the kitchen and grabbed her coat off the hook inside the door, sliding her arms into it before scooping the keys of their rental car out of the dish and clutching them, her hands clammy.

And then Vanessa breezed out of the kitchen, once again leaving Heather in complete awe of how beautiful this woman was, her hair tossed over one shoulder.

Why? Why did this all have to happen this way?

Heather opened the front door, giving Vanessa some space to gather her things, and the frigid night air surrounded her as she unlocked the car and got in, rubbing her hands together as she waited for Vanessa to slide into the passenger seat and the car to heat up.

She put on her seatbelt and leaned back against the headrest, taking a slow, deep breath as she closed her eyes. She would get her chance to talk to Vanessa now, and the thought of it had her wiping her hands down her jean clad thighs.

Heather was desperate to tell her, but she couldn't just blurt it out either, and she had no idea how Vanessa would react. Depending on how Heather delivered this, Vanessa might not ever want to see her again after this weekend, and the thought of that prospect made Heather physically sick.

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The door opened, a chill slipping into the car as the interior light came on. “I’m just a few miles away,” Vanessa said as she put on her seatbelt. “But thank you for doing this. I’d prefer to be in my own bed tonight.”

“It’s no problem.” Heather wet her lips as she reversed out of the driveway and listened to Vanessa’s directions.

There was no small talk. Heather was too nervous to even think of something to say, and she knew she needed to focus on where she was going, every road, every turn new to her.

It was still hard for Heather to believe that yesterday morning, she’d been daydreaming about Vanessa on the journey here, something she did far too often for her own good.

How quickly things could change.

“This is me up ahead on the left,” Vanessa said, taking Heather away from her thoughts.

Heather pulled into the driveway, barely taking notice of Vanessa’s home, a porch light left on, casting a soft glow against the snow covered lawn.

Heather glanced over at the woman beside her, taking in her tousled dark hair and the way the light illuminated her striking profile. Heather wanted to reach out and brush her fingers against Vanessa’s cheek, to feel the softness of her skin under her fingertips. But she resisted, curling her hands tightly in her lap instead.

The faint scent of Vanessa's perfume hung in the air between them, sending Heather right back to that night, to when her lips had kissed Vanessa's neck, to when Vanessa's fingers had dug into her skin as she shook against her, their legs tangled. The daydream left Heather's skin tingling.

"Vanessa," Heather said softly. Her heart skipped a beat as their eyes met, the other woman's gaze unreadable and distant.

"Thanks for this," Vanessa said, pushing the door open. "I guess, I'll see you again tomorrow."

Vanessa was out of the car before Heather even registered what was happening.

Heather turned off the car and got out, shoving the door closed as she strode after Vanessa. Heather's breath evaporated into the freezing night air as she caught up to her, Vanessa's keys already out as she reached her front door.

"Vanessa," Heather pleaded, her breath ragged. "Can we talk? For just five minutes."

The click of the door unlocking was almost as loud as Heather's heart beating hard against her chest. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked, faint but carrying through the cold night air.

Vanessa looked like she was going to say something, but she shook her head ever so slightly as she turned the handle.

"That night we met," Heather blurted out, "It meant something to me. You have to know that."

Vanessa was very still, eyes downcast, and Heather wished she had thought of the right way to say this, but there probably wasn't a right way. Pretending to be Megan's

girlfriend was insanely immature, and now she'd just have to hope that Vanessa would understand Megan's motivations for asking Heather to do this.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you," Vanessa confessed without moving, her voice so soft that Heather questioned if she was hearing things, if she was imagining Vanessa saying the words she so desperately wanted to hear. Slowly, Vanessa lifted her gaze, and Heather's breath caught at the vulnerability she saw there. "But that doesn't matter. You should go back."

Vanessa started to open the door, and Heather's hand wrapped around Vanessa's wrist.

"Wait." Heather waited for Vanessa's eyes to meet hers. "I've been trying to figure out how to say this to you since last night, but we keep getting interrupted." She exhaled. "I'm not dating Megan." She searched Vanessa's eyes, but her expression never wavered. "She asked me to pretend to be her girlfriend."

"What?"

"When Megan was back here for Christmas and I guess, telling all of her family about me, her new friend that she'd just met at work, Anna assumed that I was Megan's new girlfriend. I don't know what happened. Maybe you were there, but Megan said she couldn't go back on it, not without embarrassing herself, and now, for this ceremony, she thought it was just easier if I came along and pretended to be her girlfriend."

Heather took a deep breath. She'd rambled her way through that, but it was out there now. "I hit it off with Megan from my very first day at work, but there is nothing between us. Not a drunken grope or kiss or nothing. She's my wingwoman. And it actually would have been really weird if she'd been with me that night that I met you... Although, if she had been, we would have gone to one of our usual bars, and

then I wouldn't have met you at all."

Without warning, Vanessa's free hand slid underneath Heather's hair, her hand warm against the nape of Heather's neck, guiding their lips together, and cutting off Heather's stream of conscious rambling.

A gasp escaped Heather's lips, and she barely registered the clatter of Vanessa's keys falling to the floor as Vanessa's other hand cupped her cheek, parting her lips against Heather's with all of the pent of desire that Heather knew all about since she laid eyes on Vanessa again a little over twenty-four hours ago.

Heather recovered quickly, her hands on Vanessa's waist as she kissed her back, trying to convey everything she felt for her, all of the time Heather had spent daydreaming about her, about this, about somehow being in Vanessa's arms again.

Heather lifted her hand to run her fingers through Vanessa's hair as she deepened the kiss, parting her lips, their tongues searching, and it was only when Vanessa pulled away that Heather realized she was trembling from the cold.

Vanessa bent to scoop up her keys and grabbed Heather's hand as she stood up, tugging her inside and shutting the door behind them, pressing Heather back up against it. For a brief moment, their eyes locked, and a ripple of dread ran through Heather's body at the idea that Vanessa had come to her senses and was about to tell her that this wasn't happening.

But Vanessa's hand was on her neck, her thumb lazily swiping Heather's jawline, as she leaned in to brush her lips over Heather's once again.

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This kiss was slower yet so much more intense, and Heather never wanted it to end. Heather sighed as Vanessa's body pressed against hers and they gave into whatever this thing was between them.

Vanessa broke the kiss, her nose grazing Heather's as she hovered there before pulling away completely. "You have no idea how relieved I am," she said, her eyes searching Heather's, her hand still caressing Heather's cheek. "No idea," she whispered.

"I'm so sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"Well, last night I wouldn't talk to you. So, it's not your fault." She dropped her hand and put some space between them. "You should get back. Before anyone starts worrying about you."

Heather nodded, and she bit the inside of her cheek as she felt her throat tighten. The sudden wave of emotion nearly threw her off balance as she pushed herself off the door. She couldn't leave here without knowing, but at the same time, she wasn't sure what the answer would be. "Are we okay?" Heather asked as Vanessa opened the door again.

A hint of a smile tugged at Vanessa's lips. "Yes. Let's just say I know what my sister is like."

"With Gabriella?"

Vanessa nodded. "Anna just wants everyone to be as happy as she is, and for her that

absolutely means being in a committed relationship. But she does have a tendency to push it too far.”

“I can admit I was more than a little jealous,” Heather said, relief washing over her as she smiled. “I helped carry the food in. She is a very attractive woman.”

“She is. And right around the same age as me, so of course, Anna thought we would perfect for one another. And maybe we would be,” Vanessa said with a sigh.

Heather’s stomach dropped at those words, but thankfully Vanessa wasn’t done.

“But I seem to be quite taken by this girl from the city,” Vanessa said with a smirk, and Heather smiled into the kiss, her body feeling light and full of energy.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Heather said after another few moments in Vanessa’s arms.

Vanessa nodded. “Goodnight.”

“Night.”

When Heather drove off, her heart was still racing, her mind still processing what had just happened, and by the time she got back to Megan’s, she had to put on her best poker face.

“Did you get lost?” Megan asked when Heather came into the kitchen to get a glass of water before bed.

“Yes.” Heather hated lying to Megan, but she already was. “I actually did.”

At some point, she’d have to find a way to tell Megan about Vanessa, and that relief that she’d been riding high on for the last fifteen minutes vanished into thin air.

Yes, she might just have a real chance with Vanessa, but there was nothing to stop Megan from completely rejecting the idea of Heather being with her aunt, and that thought stayed with her as she followed Megan up the stairs, and it was the first thing she thought of when her alarm went off the next morning.

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The reception was in full swing with guests laughing, chatting, and dancing under the warm glow of the chandeliers. But all Vanessa saw was Heather, radiant in a sleek turquoise dress, her hair softly curled as it cascaded over her shoulders.

Their eyes met again across the crowded room. Vanessa felt her cheeks flush but she didn't look away. Vanessa had tried her best to avoid Heather all evening, busying herself with wedding duties, not wanting anyone to notice her lingering gazes. But now, with the ceremony over and everyone enjoying themselves, she found her gaze wandering back to the woman who had occupied her thoughts so often in the last month.

Vanessa had no idea what to do with this situation. Heather lived a fast-paced city life while Vanessa still called her hometown her home. An eighteen year age gap separated them. Was she crazy for even considering how this could work?

Two days ago, it had been a normal Friday morning. She'd arrived at work to open up and went through her routine before coming out and helping with the customers when it started to get busy. When she had lunch at the cafe across the road, she thought she saw someone going into her coffee shop who looked so much like Heather from the back.

Vanessa didn't want to count how many times something like that had happened in the last month, and no matter how many times she told herself that it was never going to be Heather, it now was.

Heather had walked into this ballroom Friday night on Megan's arm, and Vanessa didn't have any time to be happy that for once, her eyes weren't playing tricks on her.

Instead, Vanessa thought her heart might shatter into a million pieces, seeing the woman who had captivated her so completely that night in New York City on the arm of another woman, accompanying her niece no less. The sight of them together ignited a painful ache within Vanessa's core that had lasted for the next twenty-four hours, until Heather put her out of her misery.

Logistics aside, if Vanessa didn't already know it, this was so much more than a one-night stand, and they would have to find time to talk before Heather returned to the city.

As Vanessa got up from her table, her breath caught at the intensity in Heather's gaze from across the room. Without breaking eye contact, Heather said something to Megan, and then Megan was being waved over to the bar by one of her cousins. Vanessa's pulse quickened.

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Before she could overthink it, Vanessa began weaving her way through the crowd. Heather watched her approach, surprise and something that looked like nervousness flashing across her face.

“Dance with me?” Vanessa held out her hand.

“I’d love to,” Heather said. Her smile was dazzling as she placed her hand in Vanessa’s. A spark jolted through Vanessa at the contact.

Guiding Heather to the dance floor, Vanessa slid one hand around her waist, gently pulling her close as they began to sway. The familiar floral scent of Heather’s brought her right back to that night in New York.

“You look beautiful tonight,” Vanessa said softly.

“So do you.” Heather’s voice was barely above a whisper.

They swayed together, Heather’s cheek nearly brushing Vanessa’s. Vanessa closed her eyes, letting the music and Heather’s nearness overwhelm her senses. She knew people might be watching, and she had no doubt that even though this was Anna’s day, she wouldn’t miss what was going on between them.

Vanessa didn’t know when Megan had planned on telling her parents that she’d split up with Heather or if Heather was going to tell Megan tonight or tomorrow what was really going on, but in this moment, Vanessa pushed those worries aside, and all that existed was Heather in her arms.

Too soon, the song was ending. Reluctantly, Vanessa pulled back to look at Heather again.

“Can we talk outside for a minute?” Heather asked softly.

Vanessa nodded, following Heather out to the empty patio that the handful of smokers had been using throughout the day. The snowflakes that had started to fall at dusk were accumulating.

“Maybe not outside,” Heather said as she eyed the two or three inches of snow that was out there now.

“We’ll go back towards the lobby.” Vanessa had only taken four or five steps before she felt someone’s hand on her arm.

“There you are.”

Vanessa turned to see Gabriella as she stood up from the table by the patio doors, her hand falling away. Had she been here all evening? And why had she even been invited?

“Hi,” Vanessa said, taking in Gabriella’s deep green dress, aware of the fact that Heather was witnessing this.

“I’ve been trying to catch your eye all evening,” Gabriella said with a warm smile. “You’re a hard woman to get a hold of. I feel like every time I drop by the coffee shop, you’re out or in the middle of something.”

“Yeah, well.” Vanessa swallowed, desperately trying to wrap up this conversation without being rude. “There’s always something that needs to be taken care of.”

“Well, hopefully not here. Would you like to dance?”

Vanessa sucked in a breath, chancing a look to her left, and Heather gave her the subtlest nod before making her way to the bar. “Sure,” Vanessa said, tearing her eyes away from Heather and following Gabriella out to the dance floor.

“So, that’s your niece’s girlfriend?” Gabriella asked as they stood across from each other while the band introduced the next song.

“Yes. Yeah.” Vanessa could hear her pulse thumping in her ears. She’d never been good at lying.

Gabriella’s eyebrows rose. “I don’t mean to pry, and I think the whole town knows at this point that I’d ask you out if I thought I had a chance, but you’re not... You’re not having an affair with your niece’s girlfriend, are you?”

The drums kicked in, followed by the guitar and then the lead singer’s husky voice soulfully crooning out the lyrics to a slow love song that Vanessa immediately recognized.

“No,” Vanessa said as she let Gabriella take the lead, sliding her arm around Vanessa’s waist.

“No?” Gabriella asked, a coy smile on her lips.

“It’s so complicated. Look, they’re not really dating. My sister is a bit too enthusiastic when it comes to other people’s dating lives, and I think Megan’s just trying to keep her happy or at the very least out of her meddling reach for just a little while.”

“And does Megan know that you two are...”

“No. And we’re not... Not really together.”

Gabriella laughed softly. “It’s okay. You don’t have to explain, but I shouldn’t wait for you, should I?”

Vanessa inhaled deeply.

“It’s pretty obvious that you two have some kind of connection,” Gabriella said.

“I don’t know what we have,” Vanessa said honestly as they swayed to the music, her voice barely audible over the music.

And that was the truth. Vanessa could safely say that she’d never felt like this before, and it terrified her, on so many levels. She had lived a good portion of her life, built a business, had her fair share of failed relationships. And now, here was this captivating woman who had appeared out of nowhere and turned her world upside down.

There were far more reasons that this wouldn’t work than there were chances that it would. The age gap alone posed a monumental challenge. Not to mention the fact that everyone in this room thought that Megan and Heather were a real couple. Could she really upend her life, all for a fleeting infatuation?

But when Heather turned her head, meeting her gaze from across the room with those striking blue eyes, all those doubts faded away. Vanessa knew that when she wanted something, she could make it happen, and maybe she was finally ready to trust her heart.

If this was meant to be, she would find a way.

Megan joined Heather at the bar, and they both ordered cocktails. Heather tried not to

watch Gabriella and Vanessa dancing. She knew it meant nothing, but it was hard not to compare herself to Gabriella. She was probably in her mid-forties. She owned a restaurant. And she was undeniably beautiful. Everything about her, from her elegant posture to her confident smile, spoke of a woman fully in her prime.

Next to Gabriella's striking maturity, Heather felt young, uncertain. For all her stylish clothes and creative talents, she wondered if she could ever match up to someone like Gabriella.

"Here you go," Megan said, handing Heather her cocktail.

"Thanks." Heather forced herself to ignore Vanessa and Gabriella, focusing on Anna and Bob instead. "I don't think your parents have left the dance floor."

Megan smiled as she reached for her glass. "They've been planning this for years. I think their wedding was on a tight budget, and well, most of the people here weren't around yet to celebrate with them. They've got so many nieces and nephews, grandchildren. They wanted to have a day out with everyone involved."

"Your family is so nice. Everyone I've met. I feel bad, you know."

"About lying?"

Heather nodded. "Yeah." She couldn't stop herself from looking in Vanessa's direction again, except this time Vanessa was staring right back at her.

"I'll let them down easy," Megan said with a smile. "I'll make sure they know that it was my decision and that we're better suited as best friends than partners."

"Yeah, I'd like for them not to hate me."

“Except, you probably won’t see them again.”

Heather inhaled a sharp breath. That would be true, except for that fact that Heather wanted more than anything to have a real chance with Vanessa.

“It’s okay, Heather.”

“Hm?” Heather turned to face her best friend.

“I know.”

Heather’s breath stalled. “You know what?”

“I know that you have a massive crush on my aunt.”

“Oh,” Heather said with a laugh, relief flooding through her. “Yeah. Well. Yeah, I can’t deny that.”

“It’s very obvious, by the way. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this smitten before,” Megan said. “Right from when we had dinner on Friday night, you couldn’t take your eyes off her.”

“I never said I could act.” Heather took a drink, her heart rate increasing by the second. This was her chance to come clean.

“You know I’m your wingwoman, but...”

Heather pressed her lips together. Here it comes. Megan was going to tell her that she just can’t approve of Heather dating her aunt.

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Megan held her gaze. “I don’t think she’d date someone so much younger than her. I could be wrong, but it’s just a gut a feeling. Most people wouldn’t. I don’t know where you keep finding these women, by the way.”

“They think that they wouldn’t, and then they meet me,” Heather said with a smirk.

Megan swatted at her. “You’re ridiculous. But I’m being serious. Don’t get too caught up in it. She’s amazing, but I just don’t know that she would. She’s almost fifty.”

Heather bit back her response that Vanessa was only forty-seven. Okay, this was it. “I appreciate your warning, but...” She paused, trying to figure out how to say this, although the conversation so far would lead her to believe that Megan would be okay with this. “Do you remember when I met you at Urban Vine after your throuple incident?”

“Yeah. You said you met an amazing woman, but that for once, you accepted the fact that it wasn’t going to work out. But you didn’t tell me why.”

Heather opened her mouth just as Megan put two and two together.

Megan’s eyes went wide. “You met my aunt Vanessa?!”

“Yes. And it was probably the best night of my life. The connection was instant. But I knew she lived somewhere in rural Pennsylvania and that she owned a business there.”

“Yeah, but two hours isn’t crazy,” Megan said, her eyebrows furrowed.

“Wait, are you trying to convince me to make it work?” Heather asked with a laugh.

“I thought you’d hate me.”

“The reason my mom thought you were my girlfriend was because I couldn’t stop gushing out you. Of course, I want you to be happy, and if it’s with my favorite aunt?” Megan shook her head. “Why wouldn’t I want that?”

Heather put her drink down and wrapped her arms around Megan, not even caring how ridiculous they looked, swaying back and forth as they hugged. “I feel like I’m in a dream.”

“Oh, I love this song,” Megan said, holding her hand over her heart after Heather had finally let her go. “It’s so romantic.” She narrowed her eyes, a lightbulb going off somewhere in her head as she reached for Heather’s hand. “I’m going to ask Gabriella to dance and save Vanessa. And then you can dance with her. Come on.”

Heather downed the rest of her cocktail before leaving the empty glass on the bar, happily following Megan out onto the floor.

Heather tried to hide her smile as she met Vanessa’s eyes, and Megan subtly cut in.

Vanessa met her eyes, a lopsided smile tugging at the corner of her lips, and then Gabriella was dancing with Megan.

Vanessa held out her hand, and Heather took it without hesitation. They swayed as they danced, bodies inches apart, and Vanessa’s hand on her bare shoulder sent a shiver down her spine.

“You told her?” Vanessa asked.

“Kind of.”

Vanessa arched an eyebrow.

“Megan could tell that I was attracted to you.”

“Oh really?”

“But she warned me that you might not be interested in someone so much younger.” Heather held her gaze, looking for any signs of confirmation of that idea, but Vanessa’s expression remained neutral. “And then I admitted to meeting you in New York, and Megan was actually trying to talk me into making this work, you know, with the distance and everything.”

“She was?”

Heather bit her lip for a second. “Yeah. And then she came up with the idea to whisk Gabriella away and let us dance together. She’s an amazing friend,” Heather added softly, the reality of Megan’s approval hitting her in that moment.

Not that it mattered what Megan thought if Vanessa wasn’t interested in her beyond that one night they’d had together. That kiss last night would lead Heather to believe that she did, but she wasn’t going to bank on it. They were living very different lives, and Gabriella was here, in Vanessa’s hometown, someone who would actually be perfect for Vanessa.

“You’re staying here tonight?” Vanessa asked, her voice low as she leaned closer, her breath tickling the shell of Heather’s ear as she spoke.

Heather swallowed. She’d been surprised when Megan told her to pack an overnight bag, but it was more to do with the weather forecast than the distance. The forecast

was for at least six inches by morning but possibly up to a foot. She'd still offered to drive back, but Megan said that they'd already block booked the rooms, and that it was just easier.

Right now, she was so glad that they were all staying.

"Yes," Heather said, her heart fluttering wildly now at the idea of sneaking up to Vanessa's room in the next hour or two.

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Vanessa pulled back, meeting Heather's eyes before surveying the room. There were maybe fifty guests left now if Heather had to guess. "I know we need to talk," Vanessa said softly, "But I can't stop thinking about you. About us. And after thinking that it could never happen again, that's all I can think about now."

Heather's heart stuttered. This couldn't be real. Her fingers drifted to the nape of Vanessa's neck, hidden beneath her luxurious hair, lazily tracing a pattern there as they swayed to the music. "Do you think anyone would notice if we left?"

"No," Vanessa answered, her voice breathless, as if Heather's light touch was having a serious effect on her. "No one would."

"Then maybe we should go." Heather felt like she was floating. If she thought there was electricity in the air between them at the wine bar that night they met, this was a full on electrical storm. Every single touch, every look set off a wave of reactions, and by the time they'd left the ballroom, trying to look as casual as possible, and stepped into the elevator, Heather's skin was tingling, her breathing uneven, her stomach filled with butterflies.

Vanessa hit the button for the third floor, and then her hands were on Heather's waist, her head tilting as she leaned in to capture Heather's lips in a breathtaking kiss.

As the elevator ascended, Heather lost herself in the kiss, her fingers splayed against Vanessa's cheek. She could feel the heat of Vanessa's body pressed against her own, and the scent of her perfume filled her nose. Heather moaned when Vanessa's tongue slid across her own.

Would she ever get enough of this woman?

The doors pinged open, and it took them a second to pull apart, turning just as the doors started to close again, but they weren't on the third floor.

They'd somehow gone back down to the lobby, and standing there, in her white satin dress, was Anna, her mouth open, her eyes moving between them.

Vanessa lunged forward to keep the doors from closing. "It's not what you think," she said, the doors trying to close again against her arm.

"I don't know what to think," Anna said, her eyes still wide as Heather stepped out of the elevator and Vanessa did the same, standing beside her as the doors finally fell shut.

Vanessa pursed her lips. "Megan and Heather were never together," she said in a rush. "Megan was telling all of us about her new friend from work, and you assumed they were a couple. Look, it's fine. It's all just a bit of a misunderstanding."

"Megan asked me to come with her this weekend," Heather added, because she felt like an idiot standing there and not saying anything. "I'm her best friend, so of course I agreed to come as her date, but we're just friends."

Anna inhaled a deep breath as she shook her head. "So, no one's getting hurt here? No one's cheating on anyone?"

The tension building up in Heather's body came out as a soft laugh, a smile coming to her lips. "No. Not at all."

"No," Vanessa said at the same time, shaking her head. "We actually met before. In the city."

“Last month?” Anna guessed, looking between the two of them.

Heather nodded.

“So, this is the woman you met who you said it’d never work out with,” Anna continued. “And presumably, why you wouldn’t give Gabriella a chance.

Vanessa sighed. “Yes.”

Anna pointed down the hall. “I was just on my to the restroom. I didn’t mean to... Interrupt.”

“Anna, this was your weekend,” Vanessa said with a sigh. “I didn’t want to take anything away from that with my own drama.”

“And Megan was the same,” Heather said softly. “She didn’t want you worrying about her.”

“I’ve had the best weekend,” Anna said with a warm smile. “And if this is the start of something more serious, then... Well, I couldn’t be happier. For both of you. I’ll say goodnight then,” Anna said, reaching out to give her younger sister’s shoulder a squeeze, a hint of a smile on her lips as she turned.

It wasn’t until Anna was completely out of sight that either of them could relax.

“Did that just happen?” Heather asked as Vanessa pressed the button for the elevator again.

“I’m just glad that we’ve cleared the air. I hate lying. Especially to Anna.”

The doors slid open and when Vanessa hit the button for the third floor again, she

found Heather's hand, interlacing their fingers as she leaned back against the metal wall.

"You okay?" Heather asked, a different kind of nervousness consuming her now. Was Vanessa doubting this now that her sister knew? Now that they weren't sneaking around?

"Yeah," Vanessa said with a hint of smile. "I was nervous about telling her, assuming there was something to tell her. I'm trying not to get too carried away with this, but it's hard not to." Her eyes softened as she gazed at Heather, her smile widening ever so slightly.

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Reaching out, Vanessa gently brushed a strand of hair from Heather's face, her fingers lingering for a moment against Heather's cheek.

The ping of the elevator interrupted another charged moment, and Heather's body was humming with pent up desire.

Vanessa found her hand again, leading her down the carpeted hallway towards her room, goosebumps rippling over Heather's skin as she ached for so much more.

Heather followed Vanessa inside her. The room was dimly lit, the only source of light coming from a lamp on the nightstand. Vanessa closed the door behind them, and in the quiet of the moment, their eyes locked, the passion between them evident.

Heather didn't know who moved first, but they were in each others arms in seconds. Heather sighed into the kiss, never wanting anything as much as she wanted Vanessa right now.

Vanessa's hands fumbled with the zipper on Heather's dress, and eventually Heather broke the kiss, turning to allow Vanessa to lower the zipper, the fabric sliding down Heather's body, pooling on the floor.

"You're stunning," Vanessa whispered, her voice full of reverence as Heather turned back around, her eyes trailing over her.

"My turn," Heather said, her heart fluttering in her chest as she put her hands on Vanessa's hips, turning her and guiding Vanessa's dress off her gorgeous body.

Their heels came off next, and then they were stumbling towards the bed, unwilling to break their kiss. They were still in their bras and underwear as they fell onto the bed, Heather managing to be on top, but that only lasted a few seconds before Vanessa pinned her to the bed, both of them breathless.

Vanessa looked down at her with lust in her eyes before she reached behind her and unhooked her bra. Heather half sat up to do the same, and then Vanessa was back on top of her, her hand on Heather's neck as she kissed her so slowly, so deeply.

Heather tried to reverse their positions, but Vanessa wouldn't give in, pushing her thigh between Heather's legs in an attempt to roll her onto her back.

"I want you," Heather panted against Vanessa's lips, her voice hoarse with need.

Vanessa's hands moved lower, cupping the curve of Heather's ass, pulling her closer.

Heather moaned softly into Vanessa's mouth, her fingers threading through Vanessa's hair, their breathing becoming ragged as they lost themselves in each other.

Heather slid her hand between them, cupping Vanessa's sex through her underwear.

"I need you," Vanessa said, her breath hot against Heather's throat. "Please."

Heather traced her fingers over Vanessa's sex before pressing her hand against her stomach and slipping her hand beneath the waistband of her panties. Heather moaned at the slick heat she found there. "Oh fuck, Vanessa. You're so wet."

"I've spent so many nights dreaming of this," Vanessa murmured, her thumb trailing over Heather's bottom lip and then that hand slid lower, teasing her nipple on its way down.

Heather thrust her fingers inside, and Vanessa arched into her, her own hand sliding over Heather's mound and entering her without warning.

Heather's mouth fell open, her hips rolling as they both moved their fingers faster, desperation taking over.

"What are you doing to me?" Heather moaned against Vanessa's lips before kissing them, her tongue darting over Vanessa's until they couldn't kiss anymore, when breathing became more essential.

"I'm so close," Vanessa panted.

Heather's grip on Vanessa's ass tightened, pulling her closer, adding more pressure, and seconds later Vanessa was crying out, her body shaking against Heather's.

Hearing Vanessa come took Heather over the edge, and it brought her right back to their first night, when the same thing had happened. Never before had that been enough, but with Vanessa, it was everything. Heather didn't think she'd ever get enough of hearing Vanessa whimper and moan, curses rolling off her tongue before her orgasm took over.

Heather was still catching her breath when she felt Vanessa move. She lifted her head to see Vanessa getting comfortable between her legs, and Heather's head fell back against the sheets, a smile coming to her lips.

"You're too much," Heather said with a laugh.

"Do you need more time?" Vanessa asked, a glint in her eyes as she eased Heather's underwear down her legs, tossing it over the side of the bed.

"No. Never."

“Good,” Vanessa said, her hands on Heather’s thighs as she eased her legs apart, and Heather saw stars.

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Vanessa stirred as she started to wake up, the faint trace of morning light seeping through the cracks in the hotel room curtains. She blinked slowly, her eyes adjusting to the soft glow that bathed the room in a gentle light. Beside her, Heather lay still, one arm tucked under her pillow.

After the whirlwind of the weekend's events, this peaceful morning felt like a rare gift. She studied Heather's sleeping form, taking in every detail, her mussed hair splayed across the pillow, the slow rise and fall of her chest. Vanessa resisted the urge to reach out and brush a strand of hair from Heather's face, not wanting to disturb this perfect moment.

She thought back over the chaotic chain of events that had led them here. So much had happened in such a short time. And now here they were, waking up side by side, yet to talk about what it was they were actually doing.

There was still so much uncertainty between them. But for now, she let herself enjoy this, snuggling up against Heather as Vanessa closed her eyes again, letting the soft morning glow and Heather's rhythmic breathing lull her back to sleep.

Later, as Vanessa's eyelids fluttered open, she lifted her head to check the clock on the bedside table, her arm draped over Heather's stomach. They had about an hour left now before they had to check out, and Vanessa wanted so much more than that.

Turning her head slightly, Vanessa took in the sight of Heather. Her light brown hair, tousled and free, spilled across the pillow, and her smoky eye makeup from the previous night had smudged slightly, giving her an endearingly vulnerable look.

Vanessa's gaze trailed down to Heather's lips, the memories of last night coming back to her, sending a wave of heat coursing through her veins.

Vanessa shifted her position, the hotel sheets rustling beneath her. As she moved, Heather stirred, a soft murmur escaping her lips, and then Heather was stretching her arms over her head as her eyes slowly opened.

"Hey," Heather said, her voice rough.

The sight of those bright blue eyes meeting hers sent a jolt through Vanessa. "Hi," she said, dropping her lips to Heather's shoulder and kissing her smooth skin.

"I didn't dream last night, did I?" Heather murmured, turning to meet Vanessa's gaze.

"No," she managed to say, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Don't go anywhere," Heather said, slipping out of bed and padding into the bathroom.

Vanessa's eyes followed Heather's unbelievably sexy body until she disappeared out of sight. She rolled onto her back before almost falling out of the bed while she reached for her bag that was on the floor, finding a mint and popping it into her mouth.

She let out a sigh. It was a happy one, but it was also tinged with uncertainty. The question was, where did they go from here?

She sat up, fluffing up the pillow behind her and took a drink of water, only now appreciating how lucky she was that Anna had reacted the way she did.

Heather emerged from the bathroom as she'd entered it, completely naked, and

Vanessa's breath caught in her throat as Heather joined her in bed, pulling the sheets back as she climbed on top of Vanessa, straddling her hips.

Heather's eyes drifted down to Vanessa's lips, and she could see the hunger in them. Without another word, Heather leaned in and kissed Vanessa, their lips meeting in a slow, erotic kiss, sending shivers down Vanessa's spine. She wrapped her arms around Heather, pulling her closer, her fingers tangling in Heather's hair.

The intimacy of the moment was intoxicating, and she felt herself melting into Heather, lost in the passion of the moment. It was as if time stood still as they explored each other's mouths.

When they finally broke apart, both women were breathless, their eyes locked in a heated gaze. Vanessa could see the same desire reflected in Heather's eyes.

"I want you," Vanessa whispered, her voice barely above a whisper. "I want more than this."

Heather's eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't pull away. Instead, she nodded slowly, a smile spreading across her face. "I want more than this too," she said, her voice just as soft.

Heather kissed her again, and Vanessa's hands slid down to Heather's hips, pulling her closer. She could feel the heat of Heather's body against her, the softness of her skin beneath her fingers.

Vanessa's heart pounded in her chest as she broke the kiss to meet Heather's eyes. "Do you really think we could make this work?"

Vanessa moaned softly, her body responding to Heather's hand slipping between them, trailing her fingers over Vanessa's sex before finding her clit, circling her so

slowly that Vanessa could barely breathe, her body so tense, so ready for Heather.

Heather's eyes locked on Vanessa's. "I want this to work," she whispered, her voice filled with desire. "All of this has been so insane," she said, finding Vanessa's lips again. "We can't walk away from this. Not without trying."

Vanessa nodded, her eyes closing as she felt Heather's hand slide up her body, her fingers grazing her stomach before palming Vanessa's breast.

Heather's lips found Vanessa's neck, her teeth gently nipping at the sensitive skin. Vanessa moaned, her body arching towards Heather's touch, and then Heather's hand found its way back between her legs, her fingers finding her arousal, evidence of how much Vanessa wanted her.

Vanessa groped Heather's ass, desire taking over as she shifted her body, making room for her own hand, gasping when she found Heather's slick heat.

"You drive me crazy," Heather said, her voice hoarse.

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Vanessa moaned, Heather's fingers circling her with faster now, and Vanessa's hand clutched Heather's ass while she entered her with two fingers, hard and deep.

"Oh god," Heather groaned, her head falling against Vanessa's shoulder, her body pressed even closer now as Vanessa found a rhythm.

Heather's fingers slid away from Vanessa's clit, pushing inside, and Vanessa's mouth fell open, her head leaning back against the fabric headboard, her body on fire.

"Look at me," Heather demanded, and Vanessa's eyes flew open, locking on Heather's, her cheeks flushed, her skin glistening with sweat. "Come with me," she murmured. "I'm so close."

"Me too," Vanessa said, breathless. Warmth surged through her, her toes curled, her grip on Heather's ass tightening with every thrust until Heather came undone in her arms, and Vanessa was seconds behind her, the sounds coming from Heather's mouth sending her over the edge.

They rocked, clinging to one another as they rode out their orgasms, both of them out of breath.

Moments later, Vanessa carefully withdrew her fingers, and Heather did the same, but she didn't move off her lap.

Vanessa reached up and brushed Heather's hair behind her ear. "When are you heading back to the city?"

Heather's hand was on Vanessa's neck, her thumb moving over her jaw as she spoke. "This afternoon."

Vanessa knew that was more than likely going to be the answer. It was Monday, and Megan and Heather had already taken today off. But it still made her stomach drop, their time together cut short again.

"I fully intend to use your number this time," Heather said quietly. "Would that be okay?"

"I would love that." Vanessa pressed her lips together. "I'm embarrassed to admit how often I've checked my phone these last few weeks, hoping to see a text from you."

"I started and deleted so many of them."

"Me too." Vanessa wrapped her arm around Heather's waist, her fingers trailing up and down her back as she spoke. "On Friday night, I could have killed you. I was so angry. So shocked. But I hate to think what would have happened if you didn't walk into that room. Would we have ever saw each other again?"

Heather's hand moved up to cup Vanessa's cheek. "I don't know," she said softly. "I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't ended up here this weekend." She leaned in and kissed Vanessa gently, their lips lingering for a moment before they parted. "I'm not going to let you go this time," she whispered. "Will you come to the city? Whenever you're free? I'd like to take you out," Heather said, sitting back to meet Vanessa's eyes. "On a proper date."

"I'd like that," Vanessa said, a smile coming to her lips.

There was no denying the connection she felt with Heather. The way their bodies had

moved together, the way their eyes had locked as they climaxed, had been something beyond anything she had ever experienced. And the thought of exploring that connection further, of seeing where it might lead, was too enticing to resist, no matter how many obstacles stood in their way.

21

Heather emerged from the subway and climbed the last step out onto the busy New York City sidewalk and took a deep breath, the cool March air filling her lungs. She was meeting Vanessa for their first real date tonight, and even though she tried not to overthink it, her nerves were getting the best of her. After several outfit changes, Heather had gone with gray jeans and a white top with a black leather jacket.

It had been a whirlwind of a week since she got back from Pennsylvania. Work had been so busy, but they'd been texting every day, and what would have seemed impossible to her just a few weeks ago actually felt realistic now.

Eventually, if things worked out, one of them would have to move, and Heather already knew that would be her. She would never ask Vanessa to leave her business behind. When she got home from work yesterday, Heather had opened up her resumé, updating it with her current job. And even though her workload was just about maxed out, she signed up to three freelancing websites, wanting to have a backup plan or at the very least a side hustle to allow her some freedom when the time came to potentially uproot her life here in the city.

Heather checked her watch. She was a few minutes early to meet Vanessa at cozy restaurant in the West Village called The Tiny Perch. Heather's walk slowed as the restaurant came into sight. The sky was a hazy purple as the sun sank behind the cityscape.

She saw Vanessa round the corner, looking effortlessly beautiful as always. Heather's

breath caught in her throat as Vanessa approached. She wore white jeans and a red top underneath a black blazer. Her dark hair fell softly around her shoulders, and Heather couldn't think of anything other than how lucky she was.

"Hey you," Vanessa said, greeting Heather with a dazzling smile and a warm hug. Heather melted into her embrace, catching a hint of Vanessa's perfume. It wasn't her usual one. This scent had notes of jasmine and sandalwood.

"Hi," Heather said as she pulled away. "You look amazing."

"So do you," Vanessa said. She tucked a strand of Heather's hair behind her ear, her fingers grazing Heather's cheek.

"Should we go in?" Vanessa asked. Heather nodded and followed Vanessa inside, immediately enveloped by the warmth and charm of the rustic restaurant. Heather's eyes wandered over the exposed brick walls and hanging plants that brought a touch of nature indoors.

A hostess greeted them with a smile and led them to a small table tucked into a corner nook.

"This place is perfect," Vanessa said, her eyes sparkling in the soft lighting.

Heather's heart fluttered. She still couldn't believe she was really here on a date with Vanessa. Everything between them felt simultaneously comfortable and thrilling, so real, yet surreal at the same time.

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A waiter approached their table, handing them leather-bound menus. They ordered a bottle of Malbec to share, and Heather's mouth watered as she perused the options. She decided on the oven roasted duck with honey glaze. Vanessa ordered the pan seared seabass.

"Excellent choices," the waiter said when he came back to them a few moments later.

Heather held up her glass of wine, thinking she'd never get enough of looking into those hazel green eyes. "What should we drink to?"

"To taking chances," Vanessa said, holding her gaze. Their glasses clinked together.

They fell into easy conversation and then the waiter arrived with their dinner. The duck looked delicious. She took a bite, savoring the tender meat and the sweetness of the glaze. Vanessa's pan seared seabass also looked incredible.

As they ate, their conversation flowed easily. They talked about their work, both finding satisfaction in their careers but also acknowledging the challenges that came with it. Heather told Vanessa about her latest project at the agency, a campaign for a new line of eco-friendly products.

They talked about their interests, sharing stories about their travels and their hobbies. Heather told Vanessa about her love for photography, and how she often spent her weekends exploring the city with her camera. Vanessa told her about her interest in hiking and camping, telling Heather about her favorite trails.

"How did you get started with your coffee shop?" Heather asked before taking her

last bite of duck.

Vanessa told the story of how she'd worked odd jobs in other people's coffee shops and cafes, but always dreamed of having her own space. When the building had gone up for sale nearly fifteen years ago, she took a chance, pooled her savings and secured a small business loan. She told Heather how difficult the early years had been but that she had no regrets, and Heather loved seeing the passion in Vanessa's eyes.

After dinner, they walked hand in hand down the tree-lined streets of the West Village. Despite the chill in the air, Heather felt warm from the wine and Vanessa's touch. When they reached Washington Square Park, Vanessa led them to a bench. They sat close together, shoulders touching. A contented silence settled between them as they sat together.

Vanessa rested her head on Heather's shoulder. "Can we just stay like this for a little while?" she asked softly. Heather wrapped her arm around Vanessa, pulling her close.

"We can stay as long as you want," she answered.

They sat wrapped up in each other under the night sky, the rest of the world fading away. Heather was enveloped in Vanessa's warmth, until she was struck with the realization that Vanessa might think Heather was bringing her back to her own place. As in her own one-bedroom apartment.

"I uh..." Heather started, not wanting to ruin the moment, but she had to say it. "I have roommates."

"I figured," Vanessa said softly without moving. She lifted her head then to meet her gaze. "It's New York." The lines around her eyes fanned out as she smiled. "I imagine that I'd have roommates too if I lived here. Do you like them?"

Heather blinked, exhaling slowly. “Yeah. They’re solid. They pay their bills on time. We’re friendly, I would say, so yeah.”

“Were you worried? About impressing me?”

Heather pursed her lips together. “Yeah. I was.”

“Don’t be.”

Vanessa gently rested her hand on Heather’s cheek, guiding their lips together. Heather leaned in and kissed her back, soft and tentative.

They broke apart slowly, foreheads touching, caught up in the intimacy of the moment. “I’d love to see your place,” Vanessa said, her voice low.

Heather kissed her again. How could she not? Heather knew then that this was more than just attraction or infatuation. The spark between them went beyond anything she’d ever felt before.

As they walked hand in hand back to the subway, Heather knew she was falling hard and fast for this captivating, beautiful woman.

22

Vanessa got to her coffee shop early on Sunday morning, trying not to feel too disappointed that she wasn’t seeing Heather this weekend. It was slightly unrealistic to think that they’d see each other every weekend.

She gave Danny a smile as he came in a few minutes later. This wasn’t the first time that she’d had to change her plans because she didn’t have enough staff to cover when someone called in sick. She’d have to talk to Danny about their numbers and

what he thought about hiring some more college students now and have them settled in by the time summer arrived.

“Morning boss,” Danny said, breezing past her as she took the chairs down from on top of the tables.

“Morning.” Vanessa moved behind the counter, going through the familiar motions of preparing for opening. She ground the beans for the day’s first batch of coffee and inhaled the rich, earthy aroma.

There would be other weekends, she reminded herself.

The morning rush came and went in a blur, and around noon, things slowed to a lull. Vanessa wiped down the tables while she waited for the next wave of customers and her barista went on her lunch break. She didn’t turn when the door chimed, but then a familiar voice filled the quiet space.

“Hey stranger.”

Vanessa couldn't believe Heather was standing in front of her, a smile coming to her lips. “Hi,” she said, leaving the cloth behind and wrapping her arms around Heather. “What are you doing here?”

Heather smiled, her eyes bright. “Well, I knew you couldn't make it into the city this weekend, so I thought I'd come to you instead. Anna was kind enough to pick me up at the train station, and here I am.”

“So I should be glad for my sister's meddling this time?” Vanessa teased, even as happiness bubbled up inside her.

“I would say so, yes.”

“Are you just here for the day?”

“I'm planning on calling in sick tomorrow,” Heather said, her hands in the pockets of her jeans. “If that's something that would interest you.”

Vanessa smiled. “You staying at mine tonight? You don't have to ask. Of course.”

Danny appeared with two takeaway cups. “You should go to the parade.”

“Oh, I was going to ask you about that,” Heather said. “I saw signs on the drive here.”

“Oh right, the Saint Patrick’s Day parade,” Vanessa said. “It starts in about an hour. I haven’t been in years, but it’s always a big event around here.”

“Do you want to go?” Heather asked.

Vanessa hesitated. “I don’t know...I should really be here at the shop. It’s maybe fifteen minutes into Wilkes-Barre, but I?—“

Right on cue, Danny insisted they go. “Go,” he said easily. “It’s gonna be dead in here once the parade starts anyway. You two go have fun.”

Vanessa drove, parking on the edge of town and walking in. People were already gathering along the sidewalks and in fold-up chairs. The atmosphere was festive, with lots of green clothing and Irish flags.

“Do you have any Irish roots?” Heather asked as they walked.

They found a spot to stand near the beginning of the route. A high school marching band decked out in green and white came first.

Vanessa glanced over at Heather as they watched the marching band go by, considering her question. “I don’t have any Irish in me that I know of,” she said. “My family’s been in this area for a few generations, but before that, who knows. What about you?”

Heather shook her head, her eyes following the band. “Not that I know of, but maybe somewhere back there,” she said with a light laugh. “I actually have no idea. My mom died when I was in college, and I never knew my dad, so...” She gave a small shrug. “I’d have to do one of those DNA tests to find out for sure.”

Vanessa’s heart sank a little as Heather’s words registered. She’d known Heather was

an only child, but she hadn't realized just how alone she was in the world. A pang of sadness washed over her at the thought of Heather not having any family, and then she felt ashamed that she hadn't known, hadn't asked about her family.

But Heather's tone was easy, her focus still on the crowds and the parade floats going by. She didn't seem troubled or bothered. Still, Vanessa wished she had known. She slid her arm around Heather's waist, the sun coming out from behind the clouds as the parade continued, a feeling of spring in the air after such a long winter.

More than once, Vanessa caught herself just gazing at Heather's profile, memorizing the way the sunlight brought out the different shades of brown and blonde in her hair.

When Heather slipped her arm through Vanessa's waist, Vanessa's heart did an involuntary flip in her chest. She still couldn't believe Heather had come all this way just to spend time with her. She didn't think she'd always be the one to travel, but at the same time Vanessa had more control over her schedule, and she would have thought that the city offered them more than rural Pennsylvania did, but maybe she was wrong.

Vanessa spotted a familiar figure waving at her from across the street as the final band marched by and the crowds lining the street started to disperse.

"Anna!" she called out, waving her sister over. Bob was with her, and the two of them crossed the street. They stood in the afternoon sunshine and caught up. Vanessa didn't see Anna nearly enough considering they lived just a few minutes from one another, and if Anna didn't come into the coffee shop, they might not see each other for a week or two.

When they went their separate ways a few moments later, Heather found Vanessa's hand as they walked back to Vanessa's car. "I meant to say it the last time I was here, but your family is so nice. Everyone I met. I know they thought I was with Megan at

the time...”

“That’s been cleared up now,” Vanessa said, clearing her throat. “I told my parents first, and then the rest of my siblings.”

“How did they take it?”

“They were surprised until they realized that Anna was the one that basically caused the whole mix up. That certainly didn’t surprise anyone. But no, they were all just happy for me.”

“Even your parents?” Heather asked as they walked. “I mean, I knew Megan said that she had an accepting family.”

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“Yeah, even my parents. It took them a little while after I came out to get their head around it, but they like you. My dad especially. He worked for a marketing agency in New York, and he said you two had a great conversation at the ceremony.”

“We did. I can’t believe both of them are in their eighties. They were out dancing and everything.”

“Hm. Well, they were always outside, spending time in the garden or going on walks. Running after grandkids too. I know I’m lucky to still have them in my life.”

On the drive back Heather asked her if she had to get back to the coffee shop.

“Yeah. I’ll see if Danny will close up for me, but I’ll still need another hour or two there.”

“How about I cook dinner for you?” Heather asked.

Vanessa glanced over at her as she came up to a red light. “Really?”

Heather nodded. “Yeah. Why not? Unless you have very fancy kitchen equipment or something that I won’t know how to work.”

“No. Nothing out of the ordinary. Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Vanessa pulled into her driveway and let Heather into her house.

“You have a lovely home,” Heather said as she followed Vanessa inside. “I didn’t take any of this in the last time. I was so nervous, trying to figure out how to tell you what was really going on with Megan.”

“I was so tempted to ask you to stay,” Vanessa said, her car keys still in her hand. “I knew it couldn’t happen. Not that night. But I wanted you to.”

“I would have done anything to stay, but just knowing that we were on good terms was enough for me. Not that I got much sleep that night anyway. I thought Megan was going to flip out when I told her about us. I still can’t believe how supportive she was.”

“She cares a lot about you. That’s why. It’s plain to see.”

“And you too. Apparently, you’re her favorite aunt.”

Vanessa smiled as she leaned in, kissing Heather. “I wish I could stay, but I have to get back.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Open some wine. Make yourself at home,” Vanessa said, stealing one last kiss before she left.

In all of her short-lived relationships over the years, she’d never felt this relaxed, and that was after months and months of dating. This was so new to her. To be this comfortable with someone, this quickly. She was used to the gradual process of opening up, of slowly lowering her guard and letting another person in bit by bit. It was always an effort, always something she had to actively work at.

But with Heather, it was entirely different.

From the moment they started talking in that wine bar, it just felt right somehow. There was an undeniable chemistry between them that Vanessa couldn't explain. All she knew was that being around Heather felt warm, exciting, and strangely familiar, all at the same time.

EPILOGUE

The sun was beginning to set over the lake, casting vibrant hues of orange and pink across the calm water. The mountains in the distance were nearly black in the fading light. This was Heather's first Fourth of July away from the city in years, but she had to admit that this was so much more relaxing. Families and groups of friends had set up tables and folding chairs, others were on blankets like Heather and Vanessa were.

Heather sighed contentedly, leaning back on her hands as she took in the atmosphere. Fireflies glowed along the edges of the trees, and the fireworks were due to start any minute now.

Glancing to her left, she smiled at Vanessa who was coming back to their blanket, padding over the grass in her barefeet.

They'd been dating since March, but Heather still got butterflies in her stomach when Vanessa walked towards her, a part of Heather still not quite believing that this was her life.

They sat in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, just taking in the scenery and the beautiful sunset when Vanessa asked, "Do you think you could ever see yourself living here? Not right away, but someday?"

Heather raised her eyebrows, surprised by the question. It wasn't something they had really discussed before, but Heather had spent a lot of time thinking about it. She knew she'd live here someday. That was inevitable if Vanessa was in her life.

Heather would happily leave the city for her, but this was the first time they'd talked about it.

“Yes,” Heather said simply. “Definitely.”

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Vanessa's eyes widened. "Really?"

Heather nodded, a smile spreading across her face as she realized she truly meant it. "I've actually been thinking about it a lot lately. I know we haven't been together that long yet. But I've never felt this way about anyone before."

Vanessa leaned in and kissed Heather, her hand on Heather's cheek. Heather melted into her embrace, the rest of the crowd around them fading away.

When they broke apart, Vanessa rested her forehead against Heather's. "Would you really leave the city? What about your job?"

"I've been freelancing," Heather said, pulling away to meet Vanessa's eyes. "I have enough clients and references that I'm pretty confident I can leave my job anytime I want now and have enough work to keep me going."

"What?" Vanessa's mouth fell open before a smile started to form on her lips. "You've been planning this? Trying to figure out how to make it work?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't I? I'm crazy about you Vanessa, and I know your life is here. Your family. Your business."

Just then, the first firework shot up into the sky with a thunderous boom. Heather and Vanessa both jumped at the sudden noise, then laughed as Vanessa wrapped her arm around Heather's waist.

They turned their gaze to the night sky as it erupted into dazzling bursts of color that

reflected off the still water.

Vanessa's fingers brushed a piece of hair behind Heather's ear, and Heather turned to smile at her, finding a dazed look on Vanessa's face.

"You okay?" Heather asked in the silence before the next firework went off.

"I love you," Vanessa said, her eyes searching Heather's. "I already did. But I can't wait any longer to say it."

Heather's heart swelled, her breath catching in her throat as the thud of another firework launched into the sky, crackling and hissing on its way down.

Heather's hand was on Vanessa's cheek. "I love you too. So much," she said, surprised by the emotion in her voice, by the lump in her throat.

And when Heather leaned in to kiss Vanessa, she'd never felt as lucky as she did right then in that moment. Lucky that Megan had gone on that disastrous date and left Heather alone that night to wander into the wine bar. Lucky that Vanessa had also picked the same bar for her evening drinks. Lucky that Megan's crazy scheme to pretend to be Heather's girlfriend was the very thing that brought Vanessa back to her.

And so very lucky that Vanessa felt the same way about her.