



# Deep in Desire

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Deborah, a cold-hearted CEO known for her control and composure, is shaken when a heated, unexpected fling with Holly—a carefree, adventurous spirit—leaves her feeling vulnerable for the first time in years. But the passion between them takes a shocking turn when Deborah discovers Holly's true identity.

As the truth comes to light, Deborah and Holly must face the fallout that threatens their friendships and family ties. The two women are forced to confront their feelings and question whether the deep connection they share is worth risking everything for—or if their desire is destined to be just a fleeting affair.

Will Holly's true identity ruin everything? Or will it all be worth the fight?

**Total Pages (Source):** 40

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DEBORAH

Deborah pulled at the strap of the midnight blue gown Cameron had convinced her to buy when they'd gone on their last-minute shopping spree before the big event. Its silk fabric glistened under the soft glow of the newly installed chandeliers of the Indigo Lounge.

"Jesus! Esme's outdone herself this time! Would you look at this place?" she exclaimed, nudging Cameron in the ribs.

"Ouch, Debs. This isn't Esme's doing. Not a chance. This is what happens when you marry money. Speaking of money, you look a million dollars tonight, babes."

"Less of the babes, Cam. This thing is itching like crazy. I don't know why I let you talk me into these things."

"Because I have incredible taste?"

"Sure. You wouldn't be seen dead in this, and you know it."

"Tux all the way for me, kiddo," Cameron laughed with a wink.

All around them, the revamped Indigo Lounge was buzzing with excitement. The day had finally arrived. It was Esme and Nora's wedding, and Deborah's closest circle of friends and half the city's elite were there.

“Jeez! Take a look around, Cam. Isn’t that Jasmine Ryder? I’m fairly sure she’s running for election. Do you see her? The blonde in Chanel?”

“She’s gotta be on the wrong side if she’s wearing Chanel. I’m betting she’s one of Nora’s crowd.”

“Um... you wear designer labels all the time, Cam. What are you talking about?”

“Never. I’m the queen of thrifting.”

“Cam?” Deborah let out a mischievous giggle, her eyes closely examining the exquisite, embroidered detailing on her friend’s beautifully opulent suit. “I’m inclined to call bull on this one.” Her laughter rippled through the air, blending with the thrilling ambiance of the upscale event.

Despite Cameron’s joking around, Deborah, who usually prided herself on being calm and in control no matter what the situation, couldn’t help but feel a little nervous.

“This is freaking me out, Cam. It’s never been this crowded in here, right? Where’s Harper? She’ll clear my head. I need Harper. Like... now.”

“No clue, but Mia looks like she’s getting ready for a set. Oh, the pipes on that girl. What I wouldn’t give to be able to belt them out like that,” replied Cam as she raised her head above the crowd to get a better look at the singer.

With a sense of anticipation mingled with sheer excitement at two of her best buddies tying the knot, Deborah’s timid smile widened as she made her way through the packed bar.

“Catch you later, Debs. As far as the eye can see, there’s fruit ripe for picking.

Momma needs her fucking VITAMINS!”

“Cam? Don’t you ever take a night off?

“Sure. Once. I think it was a Tuesday... back in 2016,” Cam retorted with a loud laugh, her voice bold and carefree.

“Very funny. Just slow down. It’s an open bartonight. Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Deborah cautioned, knowing her friend’s tendency to over-indulge at even the hint of a free drink.

“Did someone say champagne?” Cam replied with a cheeky wink as she crept off like a wolf looking for her next meal. Deborah stared in disbelief as she moved through the crowd and greeted Indigo regulars and acquaintances with kisses on the cheek (or the mouth), her charisma leading her straight into the jaws of an impending hangover.

Deborah turned her attention away from her fun-loving pal and spotted Esme and Nora. She felt as if her pride were about to take physical form and burst out of her chest when she noted the happiness in the newlyweds’ eyes. She crossed the room to join them.

“Esme, my darling. You look radiant. What a statement piece. Vera, right?” Deborah’s gaze swept over her friend, who stood in front of her in a floor-length lace gown, every square inch covered in intricate lace and beading.

“Vera who? Do you mean Nora’s cousin? No... it’s... what was it again, my love? Vanessa? Nope... um... Valerie? She’s lovely, by the way. Did you get to talk to her?” Esme’s pretty face turned into a frown as she did her best to remember the name of yet another member of her new family.

“Es, my cousin’s name is Velma. But I think Debs is asking if your dress is Vera

Wang, honey. And, yes, it is. Vintage Wang. And do you know what, Deborah? She's a goddamn goddess in it. Am I right?" Nora asked with a grin.

"You've never been more right about anything in your life," Deborah whispered with a playful smirk.

"Oh, Nora! You know I don't know about these things. You're lucky you got me out of my dungarees," Esme exclaimed with a teasing laugh as she gestured to her high-fashion gown and curtsied as far as the fabric would allow her to.

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“Your what now?” asked Nora with a raised eyebrow.

“She means overalls. She never says it right. Her grandmother was Scottish or something,” Deborah explained with a chuckle.

“Welsh,” Esme corrected with a mock-serious expression. “Anddungareesis a perfectly good word.”

“You always look incredible in yourdungarees. And out of them,” whispered Nora, leaning closer to her bride.

Deborah had known Esme for many years and seeing her friend so happy filled her with warmth. As Nora stood next to Esme, their hands intertwined in a gesture that spoke volumes of their deep bond, their love was palpable in the way they looked at each other.

“She’s right, Esme.”

“You mean you’ve seen my wife naked?” Nora teased playfully, her words, as sarcastic as they were, still filled with affection for Esme.

“Absolutely not! But you look breathtaking,” Deborah said with genuine admiration. “Vera Wang totally outdid herself.”

Nora flashed Deborah a warm smile. “Oh, thank you, Debbie. That means so much coming from you.”

“I swear I don’t think I could be happier than seeing the both of you like this,” Deborah continued as she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Congratulations on your beautiful day. And on what you’ve done to the bar! Wow! I didn’t think this place could get any better and then you guys go ahead and prove me wrong.”

Esme beamed. “We’re over the moon with it.”

“Speaking of moons... and honeys... where are you two off to for your honeymoon?” Deborah asked, eager to hear about what was, knowing Nora, bound to be an extravagant plan.

Nora shook her head and giggled softly. “We’re still in the decision-making stage. I’m hoping for somewhere secluded and tropical, but I need to drag this one away from this place first.”

“It sounds perfect, Es. You should go for it. This place can look after itself,” Deborah replied, rolling her eyes at her old college buddy. “You deserve a break.”

“Sasha will take care of things, darling. Even Mia said she could step in and tend bar while you’re away. Come on... we got this,” said Nora in an almost pleading tone.

“Mia can’t work the bar. She’s trying to write her album. I can’t ask it of her.”

Deborah decided to step in and help Nora, with the full knowledge that Esme was the heart and soul of the Indigo Lounge and had probably not taken a holiday since she opened the place. “You’ve got a gazillion friends who’ll make sure everything runs smoothly,” she said, placing a comforting hand on Esme’s shoulder.

As the evening progressed, Deborah mingled effortlessly, exchanging pleasantries with new friends and catching up on Indigo gossip with oldones. She had just managed to extricate herself from a far-too-in-depth conversation with Ruby about

some hipster art exhibition down by the Amtrak station when she felt a presence just behind her—a presence that felt as though it were drawing her attention like a magnet and forcing her to look over her shoulder.

Deborah slowly spun around and found herself face-to-face with one of the most stunning women she'd ever seen. Her tousled chestnut hair and the sun-kissed freckles scattered across her nose were nothing short of mesmerizing.

The stranger's eyes, a deep shade of blue framed by naturally thick lashes, met Deborah's with interest. Deborah knew immediately that she was being drawn to this mysterious girl who commanded her attention so effortlessly.

Well, what do we have here? You're a little puzzle to be solved, aren't you?

Deborah hesitated for a second. What could she say to this girl? The age difference was obvious, but the younger woman, with her confident smile and perfect posture, gave Deborah a knowing smile. Why was there something so familiar about her? Where had Deborah seen this wild beauty before?

"Have we met?" Deborah blurted out with little elegance, furious with herself at not having been able to come up with something better than a corny pick-up line.

"I find a 'hello' usually helps," the stranger said in a melodic and playful tone.

Deborah laughed, her curiosity growing by the second. "Yes! Hello!" she replied, almost shouting as she offered an outstretched hand. "I'm Deborah."

The younger woman's handshake was firm but gentle and reassuring. "Right! Deborah!" she said with a slight nod. "I'm Holly."

"Are you a friend of Nora's?" Deborah asked, wondering how Holly had escaped her



notice throughout the entire wedding celebrations.

Holly seemed to smirk ever so slightly. “Let’s just say I’m a big fan of weddings,” she replied enigmatically.

“I’ve got it! You’re the wedding planner!”

“Not exactly...” Holly laughed.

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Deborah wanted to take a step closer to Holly. The allure of her confidence and the fact that she was being so cryptic only served to add an unexpected thrill to what Deborah was already finding to be a lot more exciting than your average encounter. As they continued to converse, Deborah thought she could detect the hint of an Australian accent but was finding it difficult to confirm above Mia's increasingly exuberant singing. As she continued to make small talk about the food and the music, Deborah couldn't shake the feeling that meeting Holly was about to unravel more than just the mystery of what she was doing at her friends' wedding.

They exchanged small talk—Deborah finding it challenging to ask questions the girl was willing to answer—while the wedding festivities continued around them, the guests now in full-on party mode. Deborah noticed Holly's effortless charm, a wild spirit tempered by a calmness that intrigued Deborah and unnerved her in equal measure.

The crowd started to thin toward the early hours of the morning, and as she danced with Harper and Esme, Deborah found herself stealing glances at Holly across the lounge. Despite there being fewer people on the dance floor, the temperature in the room was stifling, and Deborah decided to head out onto the terrace to grab a little fresh air. The rooftop of the Indigo Lounge never failed to amaze her with its stylish pool and panoramic vista of the L.A. skyline.

As her thoughts drifted to the streets below and the vast array of life in the city she loved to call home, Deborah didn't notice Holly standing next to her until the younger woman leaned in and whispered in her ear.

"Incredible view," Holly muttered in a low and intimate voice. "And I'm not talking

about the Hollywood hills.”

Deborah wondered whether she wasn't perhaps experiencing a drunken hallucination. How many drinks had she had?

“Huh?”

Several minutes of silence ensued. This wordless agreement between them somehow felt comfortable... but charged with tension. Deborah listened to Holly's rhythmic breathing beside her. The sound lulled her into a deep sense of relaxation.

“I hope I didn't come across as rude earlier,” Holly finally said. “I've been told I can come across that way sometimes.”

Deborah shook her head gently, her heart fluttering in her chest. “Not at all. I mean, you barely answered a single question, but there's something intriguing about you, Holly.”

Holly giggled, the softness of her laughter sending a shiver down Deborah's spine. “Really? Intriguing? I'll take that, Deborah. What else have you got for me?”

Turning to face Holly in the moonlight, Deborah noticed that the younger woman appeared more vulnerable than she had earlier that evening. She found herself truly captivated by the play of light and shadow on Holly's face and the way her eyes seemed to hold a thousand secrets... a thousand promises.

Deborah reached out without a second thought and brushed her finger down Holly's cheek. She heard Holly gasp audibly and watched as her eyes locked with Deborah's in a silent exchange of mutual understanding and desire.

The party inside the Indigo Lounge faded into insignificance as they continued to

stare at each other. It was as though Deborah and Holly were the only two people in L.A. right there and then, two souls pulled together by an irresistible force. Deborah placed her hands on Holly's hips, gently stroking the soft lace of her dress. As Holly responded, wrapping her arms around the olderwoman's neck, her lips found Deborah's in a hesitant but hungry kiss.

Holly's hands moved toward Deborah's waist, pulling her closer. The two women melted into each other, the heat of their bodies mingling and the taste of each other's lips a delicious revelation. Time seemed to stand still as they kissed, the wedding and the remaining guests wholly forgotten in the rush of passion and desire in their purest forms. Two strangers intensely attracted to each other under, letting the passion take over.

"Let's go somewhere," Holly gasped as she pressed her palm against Deborah's pussy, feeling the throbbing of her clit beneath the silk dress. "Oh, Jesus... you're not wearing panties..."

"Holly... wait... you'll get my dress wet..."

"I want to get your dress wet... my fingers wet... my mouth wet..." Holly muttered in a husky whisper filled with longing, her hot breath tickling Deborah's ear.

Deborah lifted her dress, allowing Holly's hand to slip up her thigh. She felt so wet as Holly's middle finger caressed her outer lips before slipping inside her with ease, pushing deeper and curling slightly, expertly finding her sweet spot as if she'd done it a thousand times before. Deborahlicked Holly's neck before placing two fingers in the younger woman's soft mouth. Holly gasped, before increasing the pace of her finger inside, using her thumb and pressure to gently massage Deborah's clit. The excitement of the situation thrilled Deborah. She could feel her body burning as this hot stranger turned her on in the most intense situation.

“I’m going to come!” cried Deborah, not caring if anyone could hear. “You’re making me come...” She couldn’t believe how turned on she felt.

“Damn straight, I am.”

As Deborah’s long, unexpectedly fast, mind-blowing orgasm came to an end, they pulled apart. She felt breathless and dizzy as she searched Holly’s eyes to gauge her emotions. What was it she saw there? Desire? Shock? Maybe she’d never made someone come so fast. Maybe she was more drunk than she seemed?

No. She saw guilt in the younger woman’s eyes.

“I... think I’d better get out of here,” Holly murmured, her voice barely audible.

Deborah gave her a blank look, her mind reeling with questions. What had just happened? And why did Holly look like she regretted it?

“So, you don’t want me to return the favor?” Deborah managed to say in a voice tight with emotion. “I’d love to...”

But with a final lingering glance, Holly turned around and walked back into the lounge, leaving Deborah standing alone on the rooftop, the sound of her post-orgasm heartbeat thudding in her ears. People didn’t often walk away from Deborah, especially when it came to women.

She walked over to the pool and leaned against the railing, closing her eyes and letting the cool night air flood over her burning-hot skin. The memory of Holly’s expert finger skills felt so dangerously alluring. She had to see her again. That couldn’t have just been a one-off. The spark between them was insatiable. How could anybody let that disappear without even exploring it? Every thought passed through Deborah’s mind. Maybe Holly was married to a guy? Maybe Holly was on the run?

Either way, she still wanted to find out.

But as Deborah looked down at her hands, still slightly damp with Holly's saliva, her thoughts raced faster than she could control them. Nobody had ever made her come that fast before. And nobody had ever walked out of her life as quickly, either.

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HOLLY

Holly opened the doors to the Indigo Lounge the following day, where the post-wedding clean-up was in full swing. She wore the confidence of someone who had spent the past couple of years surfing the wild waves of Australia. And that's because that's precisely what she'd been doing. It was as if her wavy hair still bore traces of the salty ocean mist, and her bronze freckles danced across her nose as she scanned the room with a cheery grin. The lounge buzzed with the chatter of friends and family as they cleared tables and placed leftover food in garbage bags. Holly moved through the room, drawing curious glances from everyone around her.

“What? You don't have staff for this? I had no clue we were all supposed to be getting stuck in. I have a hangover from Hell, and well...I was expecting brunch. Where's Mom?”

Unbeknownst to Holly, her return to Los Angeles was about to ignite a firestorm of emotions that she had no way of anticipating.

As she made her way to the bar, the atmosphere seemed charged. “Yo, Holly! It's been a while! You look so different! Were you here last night? We've missed you!” someone called out from the other side of the room.

“Hey, Ruby! It's great to be back! The place has changed a ton. They still do the di Rossi double espresso, right? Coz I'm going to be needing about six. It's good to be back,” she replied with a grin, her Australian accent adding an exotic edge to her words.

“No clue! Sasha’s been cooking up some incredible coffee selections... but we’re all busy. You’ll have to grab what you can.”

Deborah, who had been in the middle of an animated conversation with Mia about her upcoming recording sessions, froze mid-sentence as she heard Holly’s voice.

“What are you doing back here, Holly?” she blurted out.

Holly’s heart skipped a beat as she recalled last night’s passionate encounter with the older woman on the rooftop. She felt a rush of conflicting emotions and turned away without responding.

“Jesus,” Deborah muttered barely above a whisper, her eyes wide with shock. “This can’t be happening.”

She watched as Holly moved gracefully through the lounge, her presence drawing attention from the older crowd.

“Mom? Mom? You here?” called out Holly.

Esme, who had been engrossed in collecting plates and piling them up as high as she could, ready to take them back to the kitchen, noticed the young woman.

“Darling! I’m here! You just walked straight past me? How much did you have to drink last night, honey?”

“Enough. I’m never drinking again.”

“I don’t know how many times I’ve heard that. I think those Australians have had a bad influence on you. You’ve become a binge-drinking whacko. I want my good little girl back, Hols.”



“Was I ever a good little girl? Seriously, Mom?”

Esme noticed Deborah’s confused expression and waved her over. “Deborah, come meet my daughter, Holly. I don’t think you ever met. She used to be a well-known face around here. And now she’s back from her surfing adventures Down Under. Finally!”

“I wasn’t going to miss my mom’s wedding, was I?”

Deborah squirmed internally and tried to maintain her composure. “H-hey, H- Holly? Okay, so... you’re all grown up. Holly! You were... like... what... I don’t even know how young... when I last s-s-saw you?” she somehow managed to say, the stutter in her voice no doubt betraying the turmoil she was feeling within.

Holly flashed a kind smile, stretching out her hand for Deborah to shake it. “Absolutely, Deborah. I don’t even remember. My mom’s mentioned you, I think. But then again, I don’t always listen when she’s rambling on. Have you ever been Down Under, Deborah?” she said casually, fully aware of the double-entendre and the effect it would have.

“Uh...Umm,” Deborah stammered, her mind still unable to comprehend the revelation.

Holly glanced around the bar nervously, hoping no one had spotted her and Deborah the night before.

Throughout the rest of the morning, Holly worked alongside her mother and the Indigo Lounge crowd, her carefree attitude captivating everyone she spoke to. She mingled with her mother’s friends with total ease, utterly oblivious to the storm brewing in Deborah’s mind and heart.

As they all sat down to enjoy some gourmet open sandwiches quickly rustled together by Sasha and Ruby, Holly found herself stealing glances at Deborah from across the kitchen table. The passionate encounter on the terrace played over in her mind as the guilt she felt gnawed at her for sleeping with one of her mom's best friends. But she hadn't been able to control herself. And the way Deborah had come so quickly, so freely... only made her desperate for more.

What the fuck am I going to do?

Holly finally managed to muster the courage to approach Deborah during a lull in the surrounding conversations. "Can we talk?" she asked softly, gesturing toward the main bar and a quiet corner of the lounge area.

Her mother's friend raised an eyebrow curiously but nodded, slowly getting to her feet and following Holly.

"You could have told me, Holly. I feel ridiculous."

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Holly took a deep breath, steeling herself for the conversation that had to be had. “About last night, Deborah...”

Deborah’s expression changed slightly as she noticed the seriousness in the young girl’s eyes. “Yeah? What about it, Holly? You know... I had no clue who you were,” she admitted, her voice low. “I mean, you’re Esme’s kid. I knew she had a kid... but... Jesus. Why didn’t you say something? I feel, ethically disastrous.”

“Listen... I just thought you were a random guest. One of many Deborahs! Mom and Nora hob-knob around with half the city.”

Deborah looked toward her feet, her cheeks flushing as a look of understanding dawned on Holly’s face, followed by a playful smirk. “But...” she continued with a hint of amusement in her voice, “You’re hot as hell. And I knew I just had to sweep you off your feet. I wouldn’t have... come anywhere near you if I’d known. But you’re kind of irresistible. And... it was so worth it, right?”

Deborah turned an even brighter shade of pink, but Holly’s teasing tone had undoubtedly eased the tension somewhat. “It’s not funny, Holly. I guess we both should have known better.”

Holly frowned slightly as she continued to gaze at Deborah. “Look, Deborah. It was just a moment. It was a crazy, unexpected moment at an amazing wedding. These things happen. We’re both adults, and we can deal,” she explained, feeling crushed by the realization that Deborah was clearly out-and-out rejecting her.

Deborah nodded and smiled. “But we have to make sure Esme doesn’t find out. I

don't think she'd be too happy about it. I don't want to hurt her."

"That's an understatement. I promise I won't say anything," Holly nodded, seeing the look of relief on Deborah's face.

They stood for a moment, neither of them saying a word. It was as if the weight of their shared secret hung between them. Holly felt a fleeting admiration for Deborah and her apparent desire to protect her mother.

"Thanks," Deborah finally said, her voice sincere. "For being understanding."

Holly flashed her a wide grin. "Hey, life's too short for regrets, don't you think?"

As they returned to getting the Indigo Lounge back to its pre-wedding glory, Holly found herself observing Deborah. Did her mom's friend understand what she'd meant? That life was too short to dwell on what-ifs and maybes? As the afternoon continued to unfold, Holly couldn't shake the feeling that meeting this woman in her mom's bar had given her a new energy... something that promised both excitement and uncertainty. And something she'd failed to find in Australia.

Holly's return to Los Angeles had so far been a whirlwind of catching up with old friends. After spending five adventurous years surfing the waves of Australia's coastlines and living off the regular amounts of money her mom wired over to her bank account, she had felt the need to return home, if only temporarily. She needed to reconnect with her roots and those who mattered most. Mainly her mother and new stepmom. Beach life was fantastic up to a point, with stunning landscapes, a laid-back atmosphere, and a string of one-night stands. When she'd first arrived, she'd felt that surfing wasn't just a sport but a way of life that embraced adventure, freedom, and the thrill of riding the waves. However, as time passed, she found it to be a shallow existence and desperately craved a deeper meaning.

Holly felt both familiar and foreign at her mother's bar, with its sophisticated ambiance and vibrant crowd. As the clean-up came to an end, she exchanged a few pleasantries with some of the regulars she remembered from before her departure and introduced herself to the new faces who had become fixtures in her absence.

"Right! I think that's everything! We'll be opening in around fifteen minutes! It's business as usual at the Indigo!" shouted Esme.

"Seriously, babe? You don't want to take a night off?" said Nora in mock surprise.

"We redecorated! Inside and out! I want people in here telling me how great everything looks!"

"You did a great job, Mom," exclaimed Holly.

"Thanks, Hols. I couldn't have done it without the wife."

"I've got the cash; you've got the amazing taste, sweetie," laughed Nora. "You know what looks good and what the clients want. Investing in you... in this place... was a no-brainer."

Esme and her friends sat down to enjoy some well-earned cocktails. Holly had a meet-up with some friends downtown but couldn't help but notice Deborah's lingering glances in her direction. There was a flicker of something in Deborah's eyes—a mix of curiosity and apprehension that made Holly want to stay exactly where she was. She couldn't stop picturing their encounter on the rooftop and the rush of passion and desire that had consumed them both, albeit briefly.

"Hey, Holly! Come join us! You've got to see your mom's new cocktail menu!" Mia shouted, waving her over to her mother's table near the bar.

Holly grinned and made her way through the already crowded room, her mind trying to process this need to get back into Deborah's orbit. Mia stood up and squeezed her in a warm hug, and the conversation around the table quickly turned to the young girl and her return to L.A.

"So, Hollybolly! Tell us about Australia," cried Mia's girlfriend, Harper. "How did the surfer's life treat you? I bet they don't mix drinks like this Delevingne Daquiri down there, huh?"

"Funnily enough, I didn't find that many bars where they name every drink and every dish after some famous or powerful lesbo. That's definitely still the Indigo's USP."

Holly threw her head back and laughed, her eyes sparkling. "But despite the lack of... wait... whatdo we got here on this menu? Right! Okay, so I didn't drink any Foster Fizzes... or... Nixon Negronis... Jodie and Cynthia, right? That's so funny! But yeah... it was just incredible. The freedom of being out on the water daily, riding the waves... I don't know if I've got the words to describe it."

"I can only imagine," Mia said, her admiration evident. "I hope I get to tour out there someday. You always had that adventurous spirit, didn't you? I've always loved that about you, kid."

Holly giggled, grateful for the chance to share her experiences with her Indigo Lounge family. But beneath the surface, her thoughts kept circling back to Deborah. She couldn't help but wonder if her mom's friend had maybe told some of the others about their encounter and that lurking behind all this politeness and questions about her life in Australia, everyone knew the truth.

No, she said she didn't want to hurt Mom.

Later in the evening, as the music shifted to a mellower tempo, Holly felt the urge to

head outside to see the glittering lights of Los Angeles. The view was breathtaking and such a stark contrast to the bare ruggedness of Australia's coastlines that she'd become so used to.

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Deep in thought about what the future might hold for her and how she was going to “grow up and get an actual fucking job” as her mother had so bluntly put it, Holly didn’t notice Deborah approaching until she was only inches away, standing to her left. As she turned, she was taken aback by the soft glow of the city lights illuminating the sharp features of Deborah’s beautiful face.

“Hey there,” Deborah muttered quietly, her voice wavering uncertainly.

“What’s up?” she replied softly, searching Deborah’s eyes for any hint of what she might say. “Incredible view,” she continued with a low, intimate tone. “And I’m not talking about the Hollywood hills,” she smirked and raised her eyebrows.

“What? You don’t like your own pick-up lines?” asked Deborah sarcastically.

“Um, listen. I don’t know why I said that,” Holly managed to mumble, her mind racing to try to find a way to shift the conversation onto another subject.

Deborah smiled, her gaze steady as she studied Holly’s panicked features. “I know, darling. I’m just messing with you,” she said, her voice laced with playfulness.

Several moments passed in silence, the tension between them palpable in the cool night air. Holly sensed Deborah’s unease despite her attempt at a joke and decided to break the ice, hoping their awkwardness might dissipate.

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” Holly began. “I’ve been told I can come across that way sometimes. I always go for the cheesy pick-up lines. It’s kinda sad.”



Deborah shook her head gently, “Don’t worry about it,” she replied honestly, her eyes meeting Holly’s with a mixture of sympathy and something more profound.

“You know,” Deborah began a little nervously. “I never expected to see you again after last night.”

Holly’s expression softened. “Neither did I,” she admitted quietly, her gaze holding Deborah’s in a wordless communion of shared understanding and longing.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about how you made me... come like you did,” Deborah said, her voice breaking through Holly’s thoughts.

Holly nodded, her heart racing. “Me neither. It felt so natural... like... I knew exactly what to do with you... exactly how you worked. I know it’s kinda wrong, with you being my mom’s best friend, but it just felt so right.”

Deborah’s gaze softened, her eyes reflecting the same mixture of emotions that Holly felt. “I haven’t said a word about it,” she confessed. “I usually tell your mom— and my friends—everything. But I can’t. For obvious reasons. I mean, I wasn’t sure how to explain what happened between us.”

“Neither have I,” Holly admitted. “But I’ve thought about it all day. I even woke up wet from dreaming about it.”

Deborah bit her lip at the thought. Oozing in desire, hungry to lean in and kiss Holly again.

Their conversation was interrupted by Mia, who was rushing over to them, her arms raised in a crazy wave. “There you two are! Everyone’s been looking all over for you. Come on! The party’s swinging in there!”

Holly winked at Deborah, a silent understanding passing between them. “We’re on our way,” Holly said, giving Mia a wide grin.

As Mia skipped away, Holly turned back to Deborah. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

“I think I’d like that,” Deborah said, a small smile playing on the edge of her lips.

They headed back inside, Holly feeling that their connection had deepened and that the unresolved tension between herself and the older and very charming Deborah was now a promise of something yet to come. Holly couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sensation of excitement. She had returned to Los Angeles to reconnect with her roots, find a job, and straighten herself out... and now it seemed she was also reconnecting with feelings she had long thought she’d never experience. She was no stranger to hot, wild sex, but this feeling of vulnerability was new to her. This yearning to know more, to know everything about someone almost twice her age. She’d never felt anything quite like it.

As Holly was helping her mother restock the bar for the next day and doing her best to avoid answering a whole host of questions about where she was planning to live, whether or not she would be doing a post-grad, what was she planning on putting on her resume to hide the fact that she’d just been on a half-decade-long vacation, and whether she could help tend bar when the newlyweds went on honeymoon, she found herself once again drawn to thoughts of what had happened on the terrace. Needing a moment of quiet, she slipped into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of chilled water.

“Hey,” a familiar voice called from behind her. Holly turned to see Deborah approaching, her expression open and earnest.

“Hey, I’ve been thinking about what we said earlier...” Holly admitted, stepping closer. “I feel like there’s so much we need to talk about.”

Deborah nodded, her eyes never leaving Holly's. "I couldn't agree more. But maybe we can start with something... a little simple?"

Holly raised an eyebrow. "Oh, yeah? Like what did you have in mind?"

"Let's just get to know each other," Deborah said with a smile. "There's no rush."

Deborah's expression filled with warmth as Holly replied, "That sounds like a great idea. I've missed L.A., you know? I'd have come home a hell of a lot sooner if I'd known you..."

"There's no rush, Holly."

As they stood there, Holly felt a sense of hope she hadn't felt in a long time. Her secret crush and desire for Deborah was making her time at home a whole lot more exciting.

### DEBORAH

Deborah stood at her kitchen sink, staring out into her backyard absentmindedly as she washed the dishes from dinner. Although she usually left the office around midnight and would often grab a take-out, she felt like cooking from scratch tonight. Granted, she'd had all the ingredients ordered online, not actually being capable of remembering when she'd last set foot in a grocery store, but she had a few recipes up her sleeve. She had had a craving earlier on in the day for homemade lasagne. She'd asked her PA to set up the delivery. And just like magic, everything was ready and waiting for her in the fridge when she'd gotten home.

"Jesus. I've forgotten what it's like to live like a normal person," she whispered to herself. "Sandy does everything for me, makes every appointment, tells me where to stand, sit, move, talk. And I can't run this goddam house without a team of staff, either! I'm a joke. A fucking robot."

The warm water cascaded over her dry hands. It felt soothing, yet she knew it wouldn't do much to wash away the turmoil within her. Thoughts of Holly consumed her mind, guilt mingling with a thrilling sense of longing that she couldn't shake off.

Deborah had participated in four meetings that day, chaired by some of her key executives, on current projects, performance metrics, and strategic initiatives. But had she heard a word that had been said? No. Instead, she'd played visuals in her head about rubbing suntan oil into a certain brunette's back as they lay on Bondi Beach. She didn't even know where Bondi Beach was, but it sounded like heaven.

It had been weeks since her encounter on the terrace with Holly, yet Deborah replayed every instant of it in her mind almost every moment of every day. The girl's laughter, her animated gestures, and how she looked at Deborah with those piercing blue eyes that seemed to see right through her façade stirred up a complex cocktail of emotions.

"I shouldn't be feeling this way. I'm old enough to be her mother," Deborah mumbled to herself as she carefully stacked the single plate, fork, and baking tray on the drying rack. She knew she'd crossed a line; one she had decided to draw firmly in the sand a long time ago. Married for over a decade, Deborah had prided herself on her commitment to her ex-wife and their life together. And yet everything they had shared had come crumbling down.

Holly's return to L.A. rattled these convictions, leaving her vulnerable to desires she didn't want to feel again.

The next day was Saturday. Deborah's heart thudded in her chest as she navigated the familiar streets of downtown Los Angeles. The city bustled with life, the honking of cars mingling with the raucous chatter of pedestrians. For unknown reasons, she couldn't shake off the unease that had settled in her chest since agreeing to meet Mia and Harper at the recording studio.

Mia had texted earlier, saying it had been a while since they all caught up and that she was desperate for Deborah to hear the latest could-be hit. Deborah had always loved Mia's enthusiasm, but she also knew that Mia's underlying hope was that Deborah would commission her to write the music for a WebFlix show. She hoped that tonight's gathering wasn't just about trying to sell her music (which was a decision out of Deborah's hands in any case) but about spending some quality time together. Deborah so needed a break from her turbulent thoughts.

As she entered the mid-century modern box-shaped building with its flat roof and

minimalist façade so typical of L.A., Deborah was greeted by the familiar hum of creativity from Mia's studio.

But wasn't she having trouble with the neighbors? She didn't soundproof the place yet? For Christ's sake, Mia! Way to piss everyone off!

She forced a smile as she exchanged pleasantries with the security guard at the front desk.

"Mia is expecting me."

"So she said. Go ahead."

Upstairs, Mia's studio was a cozy space filled with guitars, its walls adorned with posters of k.d.Lang, Tracey Chapman, and Ani DiFranco. It was clear as soon as you walked into the room that Mia was as sapphic as they come, with pride flags draped across every surface and shelves filled with books on queer history. Mia stood near the mixing desk, her broad and genuine smile lighting up her face and causing her eyes to sparkle with warmth and enthusiasm.

"Debs, Debs, Debs!" Mia exclaimed, jumping around excitedly. "It's so good to see you! You look fab-u-lous!"

"Thanks, Mia. It's been a couple of weeks, right? I've not felt like hanging out at Indigo recently. How's it going? Do we kiss? Hug?" Deborah moved in for an awkward hug, setting Mia off into a fit of giggles.

Mia pulled back. "Is everything alright? You seem... kinda tense."

Deborah just about managed a weak smile. "I have a heap of stuff going on these days. That's all. Nothing to worry about."

Before Mia could probe further, Harper bounded over, her energy filling the small space. “Deb! You made it! Yay! How’s life?”

Deborah rolled her eyes, grateful for Harper’s infectious enthusiasm. “It’s... going. Life’s moving on from one day to the next, you know? Work, sleep, eat. Start again. Shower occasionally. I guess I’m just hanging in there, Harp.”

Harper studied her closely, her expression turning serious. “The shower thing doesn’t sound so good. I wanna tell you straight. Showering is something we do every day, Deb. But seriously, if you ever want to meet up and chat, Mia and I are all ears. Seriously.”

“Thanks, Harper,” Deborah said, touched by her friend’s sincerity.

Mia clapped her hands together in an attempt to steer the conversation back to something a little lighter. Her music! “Alright, enough with all that. You two are putting me on a downer. Get comfy. Take a seat. I can’t wait for you to hear what I’ve been working on.”

“What? Who now? Who’s been working on it?”

“We. What we’ve been working on.”

“That’s right, my love.”

As Deborah settled onto the small sofa, she couldn’t help but notice the complicit smile that passed between Mia and Harper. She loved how they always teased each other like they’d been together forever, their laughter echoing off the not-soundproofed walls.

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“So, Mia,” Harper began, “what masterpiece are you about to regale us with?”

Mia gave her partner a mischievous look. “Oh, just a little something I’ve—sorry—we’ve been tinkering with. I always do that, don’t I?”

“It’s your uncontrollable ego.”

Deborah leaned forward, genuinely curious despite her inner turmoil. “I’m looking forward to this, Mia. You’ve always had that incredible creative spark!”

“Here’s hoping you like it. I’ve broken away from my usual stuff with this one.”

Mia pressed play on the deck, filling the studio with the rich melody of her latest number. Deborah felt her eyes closing as the hauntingly beautiful music swept her away.

The final chord faded into silence, and Deborah opened her eyes, her heart heavy with conflicting emotions. Mia and Harper exchanged excited glances, awaiting her reaction.

“That was... out of this world, Mia,” Deborah uttered. “You’ve broken the mold with that one.”

Mia beamed with pride, her eyes tearing up. “Thank you so much, Deborah. You’ve no idea what that means to me.”

Harper couldn’t contain her enthusiasm. “It was stunning, darling. I know this is going



to break the charts. I can feel it in my bones.”

Mia replied with a tinge of modesty in her tone. “Oh, don’t say that. You’ll jinx it! I’m just glad Debs likes it.”

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of indie-pop music, meaningful conversation, and several bottles of wine, the three women thriving in each other’s company.

As the wall clock struck eleven, Mia looked down at her watch with a start. “I can’t believe the time already! I hate to break up the party, girls! I really do! But I’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

“But it’s Sunday!” cried Harper.

“Sunday? Makes no difference in my world. This is the first day off I’ve had in six months. Apart from the wedding weekend. And I’m sure glad I spent it with you two.”

Harper groaned playfully. “Such a spoilsport, but we’ll let you off the hook this time. Isn’t that right, Mia?”

Deborah stood up from the sofa and felt an ache in her knee. “Ouch! I’ve been sitting too long. Don’t ever get old, girls. Thank you both for everything tonight.”

Mia enveloped her in a hug, her warmthsoothing Deborah’s troubled soul. “Anytime, Deborah. You know where to find me.”

Harper joined in, wrapping them both in a tight embrace. “Take care of yourself, Deb. Promise? You seem tired.”

“I will... and I am!” Deborah whimpered.

As Mia and Harper went to clear the wine glasses from the coffee table, Deborah continued to linger in the studio, her feet unable to find the way to the exit. Her mind was racing with thoughts of Holly. She knew she'd been foolish not to mention her situation to her friends. Why did she think she could avoid confronting her feelings forever? She had to face facts. She hadn't seen it coming, but Holly had stirred something within her—a longing she couldn't shake off.

The studio walls seemed to close in around her. She felt suffocated. Should she pursue this burgeoning attraction, risking everything she held dear? This was her best friend's child! Or should she bury these feelings and pretend they'd never existed?

In her indecision, Deborah didn't notice the studio door creak open. A low, gruff voice startled her out of her reverie.

“Yo, peeps. What's happening? Partying without me?”

Deborah whirled around to see Cameron standing in the doorway.

“Cameron,” she cried, her voice betraying her surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Cameron smiled. “This is one of my surprise visits. I don't like it when Mia and Harper have all the fun, okay? I'm sorry to drop in unannounced.”

“It's fine with me,” Deborah replied, forcing a smile. “It's not my place! I was just on my way out. It's good to see you, though, Cam. I'll grab a phone call with you this week?”

Cameron's playful demeanor gave way to concern. “Deb? You're talking to me like I was one of your executive producers. Are you alright? You seem... off.”

Deborah's facade faltered, her resolve crumbling under Cameron's discerning gaze.

“I... I met someone,” she admitted, her voice barely audible.

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Cameron's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Ha! Ha! Really? That's great, Deborah. Who's the lucky person? Funnily enough, I met someone too!"

Deborah hesitated, her mind racing for a suitable response. "It's... it's complicated. I'm not sure where it's heading. And Cam? You meet someone every five minutes, so it doesn't count."

Harper jumped in. "She's right, Cam. None of us can keep up with your hook-ups. But Deb... this is major! You've been chatting with us for hours, and you say nothing. Cam walks in and coaxes it out of you in under thirty seconds. Is it... someone we know?"

Deborah gulped, torn between honesty and the fear of revealing too much. "Not exactly," she said, her gaze flickering towards Cameron.

Cameron studied her with a puzzled look. "No, it won't be anyone we know. Who's new at the Indigo? These things have a way of working themselves out. I can't think of anyone new... Wait! What about that Molly kid? Esme's daughter. I heard she's gay. But no—she's out of your league, and maybe too young, even for you."

"Err... thanks!" laughed Deborah.

"I didn't mean it personally. She's out of everyone's league. I gave her the eye big time the day after the wedding, and she totally snubbed me. I think she's a bit stuck up."

"Who? Holly?" asked Mia in surprise. "Get outta here. She's lovely."

“Molly, Holly, whatever,” sniffed Cameron in mock disgust. “More fool her if she didn’t want a bit of Cameron action!”

Deborah nodded silently and smiled, grateful that everyone’s attention had been taken from her. But what Cameron’s intervention had managed to do was force her to realize that she couldn’t keep avoiding the inevitable conversation with Holly—or herself.

Harper squeezed her hand reassuringly. “We’re here for you, Deb. You’ll tell us when you’re ready. No pressure.”

“Thanks. I’ve got to head home now,” Deborah murmured, touched by their unwavering support.

“I’m staying to party some,” declared Cameron, falling onto the sofa before picking up an empty wine bottle and shaking it hopefully.

Deborah made her way out of the building and hailed a cab. As she sank into the back seat, her thoughts flew around her head in a tumultuous whirlwind. She couldn’t deny the pull she felt towards Holly. It was a magnetic force that defied reason and logic.

Closing her eyes, Deborah allowed herself a moment of vulnerability. She had to face up to the truth. Holly had awakened something within—a desire she hadn’t felt in years. And as much as she tried to resist, she knew deep down that she couldn’t ignore it any longer.

But with that attraction came guilt. She had spent countless nights wrestling with her conscience, questioning her desires and their implications for her carefully constructed life.

The streets and buildings outside her faded into the blur as Deborah’s mind replayed

their conversations, the stolen glances filled with unspoken longing. Holly's free-spirited nature was such a stark contrast to Deborah's concise and structured world, and yet, that contrast seemed to fuel her desire.

But the anxiety was starting to be too much for her. She couldn't deny the repercussions of pursuing something more with Holly. What would her friends think? How would Esmee feel about it? What about her career? The tabloids would love to learn that the CEO of WebFlix was a cradle-snatcher!

Deborah sighed, a heavy weight settling in her chest. She knew she couldn't keep hiding forever, avoiding the truth that beckoned from the depths of her heart. The time had come to confront her feelings—to face Holly and, more importantly, herself.

As she walked into her apartment, she shivered. She paced around the living room, the weight of her decision causing her to pant. With trembling fingers, she dialed Holly's number, her heart thudding.

“Hello?”

The sound of Holly's voice sent a shiver down Deborah's spine. “It's me.”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line. “Deborah? How did you get my number?”

“Your mom was talking to me about getting you an internship, so I took your number. I hope you don't mind,” Deborah explained, taking a deep breath, her voice surprisingly steady.

“Oh, so you're calling me in the middle of the night about an internship that I have no intention of taking.”

“No! I’ve been... thinking about you. Would you like to meet up sometime? I want to see you”

Holly’s response was immediate, her enthusiasm evident in her voice. “Oh, thank God! Absolutely! I’d love to see you, Deborah. How about tomorrow? There’s this little cafe I’ve been wanting to try.”

Relief flooded through Deborah’s veins. “Tomorrow sounds perfect,” she responded, consciously ignoring the fact she had back-to-back meetings all day. “What time?”

They agreed on a time and place, and as Deborah hung up the phone, a wave of uncertainty washed over her. Would meeting Holly only complicate matters further? Or would it provide the clarity she desperately sought?

Deborah sat in the café the following morning with a sense of anticipation that bordered on nervousness. She chose a secluded corner table where she could observe her fellow coffee enthusiasts without feeling too exposed.

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Minutes seemed to stretch into an eternity as she sipped her latté, her eyes flickering toward the entrance every two seconds. And just as she was beginning to doubt whether Holly would even show, she spotted her, brimming with warmth and vitality, dressed in a casual blouse and jeans. Holly's eyes lit up as she approached the table, the curve of her mouth stretched out into a smile. "Deborah! I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

Deborah returned the smile, feeling a sense of relief flooding through her. "Me too," she replied, standing up and pulling out a chair for Holly to sit.

As they perused the breakfast menu, their conversation was easy and light-hearted. Deborah was drawn back into Holly's world, captivated by her passion and zest for life.

"So, what about you? What have you been up to? My mom never shuts up about your job, you know? She thinks you're the coolest. I'd worry about the competition if she weren't married." Holly laughed.

"Oh, no. It's never been like that between your mother and me—thank god—or this could've been even more awkward," Deborah replied hesitatingly, her thoughts racing. "Work has been pretty busy. I guess it always is," she offered, and then, choosing her words very carefully, she continued, "But I've also been... thinking about other things."

Deborah saw a flicker of understanding in Holly's eyes. "Things?"

Deborah nodded, "About us; about everything that happened."



Their eyes locked, and in that moment, Deborah sensed a shared vulnerability—a recognition of their unspoken emotions. She took a deep breath, doing her best to push aside her fears.

“Holly, I... I feel something for you,” she declared in an uncertain voice. “Something I can’t quite explain. Something super unexpected began bubbling from the moment we started to speak.”

Holly’s response was measured, her expression somewhere between empathy and caution. “Deborah...”

4

## HOLLY

Holly couldn’t shake the warmth that spread through her whenever Deborah was near. It wasn’t just her infectious laugh or the way she effortlessly captivated everyone around her. It was the subtle gestures, such as how Deborah would tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear whenever she was concentrating, or the genuine interest she showed in people’s stories, no matter how mundane they seemed. And so many of her mother’s friends told extraordinarily boring stories.

But Holly knew she and Deborah were entering dangerous territory. Deborah had been friends with her mother for years, and she knew how much she cherished their closeness. What if revealing her true emotions right here and now risked all that? The thought gnawed at her as they sat across from each other.

Deborah smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners in a way that made Holly’s heart skip a beat.

“You were about to say something, Holly?”

Holly hesitated, her fingers tracing the rim of her cup. She so wanted to confide in Deborah. She felt she needed to tell her how much she meant to her. But her fear was holding her back. Deborah had just admitted her feelings, hadn't she? But what if they were to take this thing between them further... and it ruined everything?

Taking a deep breath, Holly made eye contact with Deborah and responded, her voice quivering. "I'm the same, Deborah. I've been thinking about us. Of course, I have. I mean, what happened at the wedding was... incredible. God, what a turn-on..."

"And I've yet to return the favor, right? You took care of me and then... nothing. But you made me feel so alive. And I want to see if you can get as good as you give, Holly. Jesus, I can't believe I'm saying this to Esme's kid. What's wrong with me? It feels so wrong sometimes. But you are an adult. A strong minded, consenting, beautiful woman."

Holly smiled as her fingers rustled through her hair. "I think you and I have a sexual connection that's rare. I want to see where this goes."

Deborah leaned forward, a look of concern etched on her face. "In what way, though? I mean, let's be really serious for a second here."

Holly's heart was thudding in her chest. This was it. She couldn't hold back any longer. "It's more than what happened on the terrace. I-I think I might have feelings for you. I've been asking around about you. Everyone likes you. Cam never stops singing your praises. You're something else. I want to know everything there is to know about you. I'm talking more than friendship. More than hooking up... I want to explore things with you. See where this goes."

A heavy silence hung between them, and Holly's pulse quickened with each passing second. Deborah was the first to speak, her expression softening into a gentle smile. "Holly, I... I think I feel the same way. I mean, that's why I called you. It's just that

I'm so worried. This is so unlike me."

A sensation of relief washed over Holly mingled with disbelief. "You do?"

Deborah nodded, reaching across the table to gently squeeze Holly's hand. "I've been so afraid to say anything. I didn't want to risk my friendship with your mother. I still don't. I can't even imagine what people are going to say about this. But... I just can't stop thinking about you."

Their fingers intertwined, and, at that moment, Holly knew that their brief encounter would turn into something deeper, something worth exploring.

"I'm so glad we're having this conversation," Holly murmured as she looked down at the table, her cheeks flushing pink. "And yes, you owe me. And I'd like to call in the favor as soon as possible."

"Oh, I can't wait. Just the thought of touching you, of?—"

Their shared confession was interrupted by the sudden ringing of Deborah's phone. She picked it out of her purse and stared at the screen.

"Don't go anywhere. We haven't finished," she said with a wink, her expression shifting to one of concern as she answered the call.

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“Hello? Yes, this is she,” Deborah said, her voice taking on a professional tone. Holly watched as she listened to the caller intently, her brow furrowing slightly.

“It isn’t a problem, Jay! I said I’d be in before noon, didn’t I? I can’t be at your beck and call twenty-four/seven, you know? Okay! Jesus! I’ll be there as soon as possible,” Deborah snapped before ending the call. She looked back at Holly, a hint of apology in her eyes. “I’m so sorry, I have to go. There’s an emergency at the office, and if I don’t get in and calm things down, fuck knows what’ll happen.”

Holly nodded, trying to hide her disappointment with a shrug of her shoulders. “Listen, Dee, don’t sweat it. These things happen. Can I call you Dee?”

Deborah stood up, hastily gathering her things. “You can call me whatever you like. I like Dee. Sure. Why not? I’ll call you later, okay? I want us to pick things up where we left off.”

“Absolutely,” Holly replied softly, managing a smile despite the sinking feeling in her chest.

Deborah hurried out of the café, her hair bouncing behind her.

The aura of her sent Holly into a spin. She craved more. She couldn’t help but wonder who had called Deborah. Was it really a colleague? Or could it have been something more personal? They hadn’t had the exclusivity chat. Hell, they’d hardly really communicated at all. The thought nagged at her, stirring up a mixture of curiosity and jealousy she hadn’t expected. Why should she even care? She barely knows the woman, so why was she so damn obsessed.

She sipped her coffee slowly, replaying their conversation in her mind. Deborah's words of affection echoed in her thoughts, soothing her uneasy mind. But there was still a lingering doubt. Did Deborah already have someone else in her life? Was she seeing someone? She'd just assumed she wasn't because she'd been alone at the wedding. And she'd been careful not to ask Cam for too many details.

Holly shook her head, angry with herself for letting her insecurities get the better of her. They had just admitted their feelings for each other, hadn't they? So why should she already be questioning Deborah's intentions or integrity? Why was the intensity of her feelings for this woman so great? Was this quickly turning into infatuation?

Holly knew that she had no other choice but to try and trust the situation. She had no other choice without going stir crazy.

Holly returned to her mother's home. She was going to have to find her own place, but she had other things on her mind for the moment. She settled into the plush couch in the living room, her mind still swirling with thoughts of Deborah. Pulling out her cell, she dialed a familiar number, knowing her best friend back in Australia would no doubt be asleep due to the time difference but feeling the need to talk to her anyway.

"Hols! My main girl! I'd say it's great to hear from you, but it's three o'clock in the morning, you big dope. What's going on?" Sarah's face appeared on the screen. Her eyes were barely open, and Holly noticed a line of drool running from her friend's lower lip to her chin but decided it was better not to mention it.

"Yo, Sarah. Sorry to call so late," Holly began, her voice tinged with excitement and nerves.

"Listen, I'll live. Who needs more than four hours of sleep a night anyway, right? I'm always up for a chat with my favorite Yank. What the hell's going on? You look...

well, you don't look your usual self. Don't take this the wrong way, but you look a bit goofy," Sarah replied, leaning closer to the screen.

Holly took a deep breath, a huge grinspreading across her face. "Listen up, remember how you always said I'd never settle down? That I didn't have it in me. That I'm too much of a slut?"

"I don't think I ever used that word, Hol. Remember that I'm a feminist extraordinaire, if you don't mind. I might have just said that you were aladies' womanor something. No! Afemme fatale! That's what I always called you, wasn't it? Ms. FF!"

"Well, I met someone."

Sarah's eyes widened in surprise. "Get real! Holly! Seriously? That's amazing! I want to know everything."

Holly launched into the story of how she'd met Deborah, recounting the scene on the balcony and how she'd later found out that she was a close friend of her mother's. She also told her friend that the two women had confessed their feelings for each other earlier that day. Sarah listened intently, nodding as Holly got everything off her chest, including her insecurities and fears.

"Hey, Holly, she sounds incredible! Not your usual type though, am I right? She's some TV bigwig, you said? That's a whole different world to the surfer and bar chicks you hung around with down here, huh?"

"I just think she's incredible. The way she holds herself... the way I—and I'm sorry if this is too much information, Sarah, but I knew instinctively how to make her come. It was bizarre. We just seemed to match."

“Naaaaah! Stop! TMI! TMI! TMI!” Sarah laughed, her voice filled with genuine happiness for her friend. “But I sense there’s a ‘but’ coming?”

Holly nodded, feeling her emotions flooding through her veins. “Yeah, she kinda dumped my ass this morning. Well, she didn’t dump me, but she ran out on my ass. There was something odd about it. She got a call and had to leave. I’m just... not too sure where I stand. What if she’s already seeing someone? What if she’s just lying to me? Or what if I mess things up? I have every possibility running through my mind. I left myself quite vulnerable earlier today and she just cut me off and went back to work.”

Sarah chuckled softly. “Holly, would you just cool your ass? You’re overthinking it! Where’s my cool gal gone? This isn’t you at all! From what you’ve told me, Deborah seems just as into you. All you can do is wait and see. You’ve only been on one date, right? Calm yourself.”

Holly sighed, slumping forward slightly. “I know you’re right. I just... I want this to work out. I don’t know why. Like you said, we’re one very short coffee date into this thing. But I want to go on the chase with this one. Big time. She’s like the perfect, ultimate, main character in all of my fav sapphic romance novels that involve older women and icy CEOs!!!”

“You will. It’s your signature move,” Sarah assured her. “Now, here’s what you need to do. Just be yourself. Be upfront with her about your feelings. You’ve already started that, which is great. And it sounds like she wants to move fast on this one as well. Also, don’t forget to let her see how special you are. She obviously likes you for a reason, and let’s hope it’s not just the obvious one. Let her see your strengths. And lastly...”

Sarah paused for dramatic effect, making Holly roll her eyes. “Plan something amazing! Sweep her off her feet. Take her somewhere special or cook her a fancy

dinner. Not your typical Aussie BBQ, okay? Do something classy. Show her that you're serious about this, and show her that the age difference doesn't mean you can't match her level, ya know?"

Holly felt a surge of determination. "You know what, Sarah? I think I have a plan."

"Of course you do. You're my Holl!" Sarah teased. "Just remember to be yourself and enjoy the journey."

"I so needed to hear that," Holly said sincerely, grateful for her friend's support and advice.



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“Anytime! Now, go get your girl... or should I say much older, super hot CEOwoman? Ha! And don’t you go forgetting to fill me in on all the juicy details,” Sarah said with a wink.

Holly felt ready to take a leap of faith with Deborah to see where their connection could take them. With Sarah’s encouragement ringing in her ears, she nervously dialed Deborah’s number, her heart almost bursting out of her chest with anticipation. Deborah answered after a few rings, her voice warm and welcoming.

“Hey, Holly! I was just about to call you,” Deborah said in a cheery voice.

“Hi! Sorry, I couldn’t wait for you to call. I was thinking... how about we go out somewhere... properly this time. More than just a quick coffee. And somewhere away from the Indigo Lounge? Just the two of us?” Holly suggested, trying her hardest to keep her voice steady.

Deborah’s response was immediate and enthusiastic, “I’d love to! What did you have in mind?”

“Well, you might think this is a bit weird... but how about we go horseback riding? It’s something I used to love doing as a kid when I lived here. Is that too wild? It’s a crazy idea. Listen, maybe I just got carried away. What a stupid suggestion. Why can’t I just be normal and ask you to go for a burger or something? Honestly, I don’t know where I come up with these ideas half the time. You’re probably busy at work. How on earth would you have time to travel out of town with me and get on the back of a horse? What good would that do you? Do you want to go for ice cream or something?”

“Um, Holly? You can stop now. Are you going to let me answer? You’re talking at a million miles an hour. Chill, sweetie.”

“Sorry.”

“Horse riding sounds amazing. I’ve never done it before, but I’m willing to give it a try. I’ve fixed the issue at the office, and I’m taking some time off tomorrow. Are you free? We can make a day of it.”

Holly’s heart soared at Deborah’s willingness to try something new with her. They agreed to meet at 7 a.m. the following day.

5

## DEBORAH

As they arrived, the morning sun was blaring across the turquoise sky, casting a warm glow over horses grazing in the fields at the ranch. Holly helped Deborah with her helmet and talked her through the basics of riding before they set off on a leisurely trail ride.

Deborah couldn’t help but admire Holly’s grace and confidence in the saddle as they rode side by side. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, and the morning breeze teased strands loose around her beautiful face. She found herself stealing glances at the younger woman’s toned arms and how her muscles moved fluidly underneath her taut skin.

After an hour or so, the horses began to tire, and Holly suggested taking them back to base. The two women dismounted and walked the horses back to the stable. Deborah could feel a palpable tension between them, a mutual desire that had been simmering since their confessed feelings the day before.

“Thank you for suggesting this, Holly. That was amazing. I felt so free,” Deborah said, her voice almost a whisper. Her friend’s daughter smiled back with a warmth that sent shivers down her spine.

Deborah grinned from ear to ear, encouraged by their growing connection. “I’m so glad you suggested this, Holly. There’s something about being out in nature that feels so exhilarating, right?”

They moved closer together, their bodies almost touching as they continued to chat, the air thick with as-of-yet-unspoken desire. Holly tentatively reached out, brushing a stray hair from Deborah’s cheek. Deborah’s breath increased slightly as her eyes locked onto Holly’s hungrily.

Without saying another word, Holly leaned in, her lips falling onto Deborah’s in a tender and passionate kiss. Deborah responded eagerly, her hands finding their way to Holly’s curved waist and pulling her into her own, more voluptuous body.

As their kiss deepened, the hillsides and paddocks around them faded into the background. Deborah could feel every inch of Holly’s body pressed against hers, the heat between them igniting a fire that burned deeply inside her with each passing moment.

Eventually, they pulled apart. Deborah rested her forehead against Holly’s, their fingers intertwined.

“I want you, Holly. I do. But... your mom... I don’t know what to think,” Deborah murmured, her voice husky with both desire and guilt.

“I don’t want to talk about my mom right now,” Holly replied sharply. “Let’s just go to your car.”

Deborah led Holly to her car, their hands never leaving each other's as they climbed into the back seat. They kissed hungrily, their bodies moving together with a primal need that Deborah felt in every cell of her being.

Deborah ripped off Holly's top in a frenzy of desire, revealing smooth skin that begged to be touched. She traced the lines of Holly's body, savoring the feel of the surface of her beneath her fingertips.

Despite the doubts in her mind, Deborah didn't even try to fight what was about to happen. She opened her mouth to Holly's, losing herself in the sweet taste and the sweep of her tongue as she explored Deborah's mouth. She felt Holly's teeth nibble against her lips. This was so much more than just a kiss. This was leading up to a point of no return, and every cell in Deborah's body knew it. Her skin felt hot, and her nipples contracted into rock-hard pebbles against her light green buttoned shirt. The ache between her thighs was so intense that it took a monumental effort to stop herself from rushing to straddle Holly's thigh and rubbing herself shamelessly against her hard thighs to relieve the pressure.

Seemingly in total tune with Deborah's needs, Holly shifted in weight in her seat, and the hand that had been around Deborah's waist now slipped up under her shirt, cupping her large breasts and squeezing gently. As Deborah groaned with desire, she leaned in, and her mouth traveled down from Holly's neck until she found her breasts. She was wearing a green sports bra, and Deborah struggled to unfasten the complicated front fastening, but when she did, Holly's firm, pointed breasts sprung out and bounced gently.

She sucked Holly's small, pink nipples and bit them lightly, making her squirm. Deborah dropped lower into the footwell behind the passenger seat until she was on her knees and her hands on Holly's hips. She bent forward, her mouth running down Holly's stomach as her fingers found the button of her jeans. One flick and the button was open. One quick zip and the jeans were halfway down her lover's legs.

“Holly,” she said as she kissed her above the band of her mismatched pink cotton panties, the ripple across her lips sending electric sparks zinging throughout her body. Deborah was wet now—soaking wet. And she felt the quickening pulse between her thighs; she wanted Holly’s touch. Her fingers. Her mouth. Her body.

Some coherent part of her mind knew that she should be stopping all this because if they allowed this to continue, everything would change, and there would be no coming back from it. She was about to fuck the daughter of one of her best friends.

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Despite knowing the trouble it could lead to, she didn't care. Maybe she'd live to regret it, but right then, all she wanted was Holly. She had to have her now.

And she'd deal with the fallout tomorrow.

"I'm gonna need these jeans to be off," Deborah ordered as Holly hastily squirmed out of the last part of the denim leg.

"Please just fuck me, Deborah. It's all I can think about," she moaned, and Deborah kissed up her thigh, toward Holly's throbbing core.

"Well," she whispered, "seems as though you asked so nicely, I always think good girls should get what they want."

Holly moaned just at her words alone, but her breath was taken away when Deborah sunk two fingers deeply inside of her. Grateful for her extra spacious car, she positioned herself between Holly's thighs, fucking her deeper and harder. Enjoying every single moan and noise that fell from Holly's lips. Deborah spread Holly's legs even wider apart, so she could now sink her tongue into Holly too. Hungry to taste her wetness, Holly tasted just as good as Deborah expected.

"Oh my g-god, Deborah, keep fucking me, please, I'm so close already."

Usually, Deborah liked to play around for longer. Usually, she'd enjoy edging sweet Holly into the most intense orgasm possible, but today all she craved was Holly cumming in her mouth, as fast as possible, especially with the lingering risk that the owner of the ranch might show up any minute.

Her tongue lapped harder around Holly's swollen clit. She pushed in one more finger, stretching Holly more. Feeling her tighten around her. Her head moved back before she ordered, "Cum for me, darling."

And with those words, Holly's body tightened like electricity had hit her core. Her back arched in the seat and her body squeezed around Deborah's fingers. She moaned so loud that it was impossible someone didn't hear. The orgasm was so indulgent, so deep, so intense, she wanted to bathe in it forever.

"Good girl. You're so fucking hot," Deborah moaned before collapsing into Holly, kissing her thighs some more.

"Swap places with me. Please. I want you so much. I want to feel inside of you," Holly yelped, still in a post-orgasmic haze.

Deborah didn't put up a fight. She took off her pants and moved on the spacious car seat, ready to indulge in whatever Holly had to offer.

"Fuck me like the good girl you are," Deborah huffed, as she moved her fingers down, massaging her own throbbing clitoris. She liked control. At all times.

Holly smiled, keeping eye contact, as she teased Deborah's wet folds. She pushed one finger inside, slipping so easily into the wetness before her.

"Don't be shy, Holly. I can't take more than that," Deborah smirked.

"Oh, I'm sure you can, I'm just savoring you a little longer." Holly bit her lip before pushing in two more fingers. Easily stretching inside of Deborah. She was so ready for her.

She enjoyed every second inside of her. Fucking Deborah deeply and slowly.

Watching her fingers rub on her own clit. The circular motions captivated Holly's mind as she fucked her more. It didn't take long until she felt Deborah getting closer. The pace changed to hard and fast. Deborah's fingers rubbing more aggressively.

"Open your mouth," Deborah moaned, and Holly did as instructed.

Deborah started to climax, her body tensing, as she squirted all over Holly's lips, chin, face, breasts. Holly had never been so turned on in her life. Deborah was so filthy, so sexy, and so fucking hot.

Her body relaxed into the seat. Her smile widened.

"Come here and kiss me," Deborah reached out her hand, assisting Holly to straddle her.

They kissed deeply. Savoring what had just happened between them. Their breathing slowly returning to normal, Holly brushed a strand of hair from Deborah's face.

"I've wanted this for so long, Holly. To feel like this, I mean. I don't know if your mom told you about my divorce. But, things got real messy for a while back there, and I haven't been able to trust anyone or... I guess, be with anyone since..." Deborah muttered, her voice filled with tenderness.

Holly kissed Deborah's forehead softly, causing the older woman to feel a sense of completeness she had not known for some time. "Me too, Deborah. Me too. Listen, I've had a string of one-nighters. You know what it's like."

"Not really. Like I said, I was married. I've always been a one-woman gal. Even in my younger days."

"I don't believe it. Not for a second. You're sex on legs, Deborah. You're like a



powerful, rich, super bitch who has probably slept with half the actresses in Hollywood!”

“Ha! Nope, you’ve got the wrong woman.”

“Don’t you own, like, half the world’s TV stations? And streaming services? You’re like a lesbo Bill Gates or something, right?”

“That’s your mom talking. I’m going to have to have words.”

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“She thinks you’re incredible. I’ve only heard about the professional Ms. Morgan from Mom. Plus, I might have Googled you—just a little.”

They stayed like that for a while longer, chatting and joking as they basked in the afterglow of their passion. As the early afternoon sky started to cloud over outside, they both knew that this was only the beginning of their journey together.

Holly was tracing patterns on Deborah’s arm when Deborah suddenly sighed deeply.

“Holly...” Deborah began hesitantly, her voice tinged with anxiety.

“Yeah?” Holly responded softly, her fingers stopping on Deborah’s arm.

“I... I’m starting to worry. I’m sorry, but it keeps pushing itself forward in my mind. I’ve tried to hold these thoughts back, but I feel sick about what my friends might think,” Deborah admitted, her eyes avoiding Holly’s gaze.

Deborah’s heart sank as soon as she’d uttered those words. She knew the conversation had to be had, but it didn’t make it any easier to say it out loud.

“What do you mean? Look, she’s my mother and she only wants me to be happy.”

“Listen to me; we’re at different stages in our lives, Holly,” Deborah explained, her voice quivering. “Such different stages. You’ve got to be able to see that. There’s the age difference. Seriously, I think you’re wrong about your mom. I’m not sure how she’ll react, but I don’t think it’s going to be as easy as you say. What if she doesn’t understand? What if she thinks it’s... inappropriate?”

“Nora’s ten years younger than Mom, Deborah! Like it even matters!”

“Our age difference is double that. Esme will be bothered about double that. Even Nora will raise an eyebrow, and nothing usually fazes that one.”

Deborah could plainly see the hurt and frustration in Holly’s eyes. She had hoped not to let her doubts cloud what they had shared, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Deborah, I don’t care what anyone else thinks. This is you and me. How do we feel? Didn’t we both say that we’ve not felt like this in, well, forever, in my case? Age is just a number, right?”

Deborah shook her head. “I hear what you’re saying, but I need time to think. I need to sort my head out.”

Holly’s mouth turned downwards at Deborah’s words.

“I guess I kinda expected some challenges, but I sure didn’t anticipate you questioning all this so soon after we...”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“You want me to leave, right?” Holly asked softly, straightening her back and reaching for her clothes.

Deborah looked at her with a mixture of regret and determination. “I think I just need some space to figure all this out. I’ve got a lot of issues at work, and the timing is... off,” she stuttered as she swallowed back a lump in her throat and blinked back the tears.

Holly nodded slowly before saying in an upbeat, breezy voice, “That’s just fine! You

can have all the time you need.”

Deborah reached out to cup Holly’s cheek, but Holly shifted backward. “Thank you, Holly. Please know that this isn’t easy for me either, right?”

Holly nodded again, her expression impossible to decipher. She leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss against Deborah’s lips. She could taste the lingering sweetness of their earlier passion.

“Be seeing ya, Deborah,” Holly stated bluntly, her voice sounding easy and confident.

Deborah closed her eyes, her tears threatening to spill over. “Holly? I just need a little time.”

“Yeah, you said that already.”

Holly opened the car door, and Deborah felt the cooler air hit her in the face. Deborah eventually climbed into the front, settling in the driver’s seat. She leaned against the steering wheel for support as she fought back tears. Uncertainty gnawed at her. It was as if Holly didn’t care. Her response had been almost indifferent. Or was it her age, proving immaturity in defense to a grown-up conversation? It was hard to say.

As Deborah drove back home, she vowed to hold onto hope. She believed in the connection they shared. She just hoped that Holly would understand her need to think things through. She also hoped that her friends would eventually understand their relationship. Although it seemed so unlikely. Why would she get tangled up with her best friend’s daughter? How could she ever explain that? Even if she suggested that she didn’t realize it was Holly in the beginning, would anyone believe her?

## HOLLY

Holly stood on the balcony of the apartment her mother had recently rented out for her in Los Feliz, staring out at the leafy street as the sun dipped below the horizon. The breeze tugged at her hair, teasing it into wild tangles that almost seemed to mirror the chaos of the thoughts whizzing through her mind. She felt a strange detachment. It was as if she were observing her life from a distance. Her thoughts kept drifting to Deborah. She couldn't get the enigmatic woman who had captured her heart with a single glance at her mother's wedding out of her head.

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Why is she doing this to me? What are we even waiting for? Oh, fuck her! I don't care! Let her have her precious time. It's not like I'm short of admirers, for fuck's sake. I could go out right now and fuck anyone I like.

But I won't.

When they first met, Holly had been immediately drawn to Deborah's obvious sophistication and grace. Her mom had told her about her friend's achievements, her poise, and how the woman commanded a room. Their brief, clandestine romance had started as a thrilling game the night of the wedding and the Indigo Lounge. She had returned from Australia and knew exactly how furious her mother was with her about the time she'd wasted there. Her dalliance with Deborah out on the terrace had felt like a secret rebellion against the expectations of her mom and the world she and her new wife now lived in. But very soon afterward, Holly found herself wanting more than just that one stolen moment.

She sighed, pushing away from the railing and heading inside to prepare something to eat. Before she could even get to the refrigerator door, her cell phone started ringing.

"Hey, hon. It's me."

"Yo, Mom! Whassup?"

"Holly, do you think you could give theyosandthewassupsa bit of a rest? You're a grown-up now. A full-grown-ass woman who speaks like a tween."

"Right. What can I help you with, Mommy dearest?"

“Nora and I are having some people over at the yacht tomorrow night, and I want you to be there. Nora said you could start making connections with some of her people. She knows everyone in this town, you know?”

“Okay, I’ll be there. But I’m not fully decided on what I want to do yet, Mom. You know, I was thinking about?—”

“I’ve got to go, hon. We’ll chat about it tomorrow. Dress smart.”

And with that, Esme put the phone down.

The invitation had come as a surprise, and Holly felt a twinge of anxiety at the thought of spending time with her mother and her powerful new wife. She was confident and carefree on the surface. She was the sun-kissed hot chick from Australia, right? But beneath that facade lay a deep-seated fear of being seen as a disappointment. She was apprehensive about how Nora might feel about her new wife’s dropout daughter.

The following day, Holly decided to make her way to the Indigo to talk to her mother one-on-one over coffee. She selected a simple yet elegant navy blue dress that accentuated her athletic build and paired it with silver sandals and a matching clutch. As she put on a pair of delicate pearl earrings, she glanced at her reflection, hoping she looked composed and not as nervous as she felt. She really wanted to show her mother that she was serious about her future, whatever it may be.

Holly arrived at the Indigo Lounge hoping to catch her mom before the mid-morning rush. As she entered the bar, she spotted Deborah standing near the entrance, looking as beautiful and elegant as ever in a form-fitting black pantsuit that hugged her curves perfectly. Her hair was styled in loose waves, and a string of pearls adorned her neck. Holly’s heart skipped a beat at the sight of her, and she quickly made her way over, her mind overtaken by the image of the woman in front of her and how hard they’d

made each other come just the day before.

“Hey,” she said softly, trying to keep her voice steady. “I’m sorry. I honestly didn’t think you’d be here. Don’t worry. I’m not stalking you or anything. I came in to see my mom.”

Deborah turned, her eyes lighting up with surprise and pleasure. “Holly. I didn’t expect to see you here either. I had a schedule change, so I came by to see if I could have a quick word with Mia, but I can’t see her anywhere. Do you know where she is? I’m having a launch party for a new series in a few weeks, and I think her songs might match the vibe we’re looking for. Cam said she’s usually here in the mornings. I suppose I could always leave a note for her, right? Or call! I’ve got her number. I can call and leave a message. I could?—”

“Deborah?”

“Huh? Yeah?”

“You’re rambling a bit. Just call her. She’ll do it.”

“Sure. Yep. You’re right.”

“Will you be at the big yacht thing tonight?” Holly asked.

Just then, Esme came rushing over. Before Deborah could respond, Esme gave her old friend a warm hug. She was dressed in a stylish white dress that contrasted beautifully with her hair, which was pulled back in a sleek ponytail.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt,” Esme said, smiling warmly. “I just wanted to ask you a favor, Debs. Seeing as you’re both here, this is perfect timing!”



Deborah stood up straighter, smoothing her pantsuit. “No problem, Esme. What’s going on?”

Esme’s smile faltered slightly. “Listen, I’ve been so worried about what Holly will do with herself after wandering around Australia for five years.”

“Mom! I wasn’t just wandering around,” Holly protested, trying to keep her frustration in check. “I was living my life and experiencing new things.”

“I know, my darling, but now it’s time to move on from all that,” Esme replied, turning to Deborah.

“You’re being a little harsh, Es! This isn’t like you. You’re all about freedom, tree-hugging, and live and let live, right?”

“Usually. You’re right. But I was hoping you could take Holly on as an intern. She needs a little direction, and I think she could really learn so much from you.”

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Deborah nodded thoughtfully. “I’d be happy to help, Esme. Holly seems like she could have a lot of potential, and an internship would be a great opportunity for her to gain some valuable experience.”

“Do I even get a say in this?” asked Holly, her cheeks turning pink. “I do appreciate the offer, Deborah. I just... I don’t want to feel like I’m being forced into something by my mother, you know?”

Deborah’s eyes softened as she looked at Holly. “I don’t think she’s forcing you, Holly. It’s about giving you a chance to see where your strengths lie. What do you think?”

Esme reached out and squeezed Holly’s hand. “I believe in you, sweetheart. I want to see you find something that makes you happy and fulfilled. Something that isn’t surfing.”

“Do you want to come by my office? We can talk there.”

“I guess so. I came here to talk to you, Mom. But I guess the talk is over with, right?”

“Consider that your pep talk, baby,” Esme laughed.

Holly and Deborah took a cab to the WebFlix headquarters downtown. Once inside Deborah’s office on the top floor, Holly felt the familiar surge of emotions that had accompanied being alone with her every single time they’d met. The office was a sanctuary of calm and order, and Holly couldn’t help but feel intimidated. Deborah gestured for Holly to take a seat on the plush leather chair opposite her mahogany

desk. She was acting so professional when all Holly wanted was for Deborah to climb on top of her and rip off every shred of her clothing.

Deborah sat down, gracefully crossing her legs. “So, what’s on your mind, Holly? Things are a bit tense with your mom, are they?”

Holly took a deep breath, fidgeting with her fingernails. “Listen, I think I’m in no place to be taking on this internship. Not here. Not with you. I should be excited at an opportunity handed to me on a plate, but I can’t help feeling like I’d mess everything up.”

Deborah leaned forward, her eyes filled with understanding. “Holly, you’re more capable than you give yourself credit for. This really could be a fantastic opportunity for you to learn and grow. And I’ll be there to support you every step of the way.”

Holly looked up, meeting Deborah’s gaze. “You think I can do this? Come on! What about all that time you needed?”

“I know you can,” Deborah said firmly.

Holly sighed, feeling the weight of Deb’s expectations. “I’ll do the internship. But I want to make sure it’s on my terms, that I’m doing it for me, not just to please my mom and Nora.”

“Of course,” Deborah said gently. “We’ll work together to ensure it’s a meaningful experience for you. Setting all of our moments aside, I still want to help you, and I obviously care about you so very much.”

The tension in the room eased slightly. Holly felt a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, this could be the start of something positive.

“And maybe I can find you a position in another department? Art design? Accounting? What’s your yum?”

“You’re my yum, Deborah.”

The air between Holly and Deborah seemed to crackle with an electric tension, a barely restrained energy that almost hummed as Holly’s words lingered in the air. Deborah’s eyes widened slightly, her breath audibly catching in her throat. She was clearly trying so hard to remain professional. To be the helpful best friend. To be a responsible adult.

“Holly,” Deborah said softly, her voice a gentle caress in the charged silence. “That’s not what I?—”

“I know,” Holly interrupted, her heart racing as she stood up and moved to Deborah’s side of the desk. The space between them shrank until they were mere inches apart.

Deborah’s gaze dropped to Holly’s lips, then back to her eyes, her breath coming quicker now. “Holly, this is?—”

“Complicated, I know.” Holly’s whisper was barely audible, but it was enough. “But you know I don’t want to be a colleague, Deborah.”

Deborah’s hand reached up to touch Holly’s cheek, her fingers trembling slightly. “I don’t want to make this any harder. I just... I didn’t think?—”

“—that we’d ever feel this way about each other?” Holly finished for her, her voice a mixture of hope and apprehension. “Because I didn’t either.”

As Holly leaned downward, their faces were so close that she could feel Deborah’s warm breath.

“Holly,” Deborah murmured, “I’m not sure if this is the right time or place.”

Holly’s eyes fluttered closed, her lips parting slightly. “Maybe it’s not about the right time or place. Maybe it’s just about us... right now.”

Without another word, Holly closed the remaining gap between them. Her lips met Deborah’s in a soft, hesitant kiss that quickly grew deeper as both women gave in to the undeniable pull of their emotions. Deborah responded with equal enthusiasm, her arms wrapping around in a frenzy of emotion.

When they finally broke apart, both women looked at each other with relief and wonder.

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Deborah brushed her fingers across Holly's lips, her eyes searching Holly's for any sign of regret. But Holly smiled, her eyes sparkling with a newfound confidence.

"I'm wet just at the thought of you," Holly said softly, her voice steady and full of promise. "You didn't answer me back at the bar. Are you going to my mom's big boat bash later?"

Deborah nodded and smiled.

"I'm sure Sasha will be putting on quite the buffet, but I don't want you to touch it."

"And why's that?"

"You'll be eating me instead."

"Holly?"

"Yep?"

"I'd like that."

The yacht was a picture of luxury, anchored in the harbor with its lights reflecting off the water. Esme and Nora greeted them warmly. Dressed in a tailored red power suit, Nora exuded an air of authority and control. Her hair was perfectly styled, and her piercing blue eyes took in everything with a discerning gaze. Holly couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt at the sight of her mother's happiness with her new wife. They seemed like such an odd match. The hippy and Ms. Tailored Suit, but she'd never

seen her mother so enamored. She half hoped her mom would never find out about her relationship with Deborah. What if it broke her heart? But she also knew that it would be inevitable if things were to move forward with her new lover.

“Welcome aboard!” Nora said, extending a hand to Holly. “I’m super excited you could join us.”

“Thanks, Nora. This yacht is beautiful,” Holly replied. “You guys are leaving me everything in your wills, right?”

“Holly, the bar’s over there, honey!” laughed Esme, pulling her daughter away from her wife.

As Holly ordered an espresso martini at the bar, she chatted with Harper, another of her mother’s university friends and a successful talent scout. Harper’s demeanor was professional yet guarded. Holly could sense the insecurities beneath her polished exterior and started feeling kinship with her.

“So, Holly,” Harper said, her voice warm but cautious. “What kind of work are you interested in?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Holly admitted. “But I want to explore different areas and see what fits.”

Harper nodded. “That’s a good approach. Don’t be afraid to try new things and take risks.”

As the evening progressed, the conversation with her mother’s friends and acquaintances flowed more easily. Holly felt a sense of camaraderie with these accomplished women and began to relax in their company.

She felt a sudden tap on her shoulder.

“I’m hungry...” whispered Deborah in her ear.

“Follow me. Nora gave me the tour earlier. I know the perfect secluded little cabin.”

The room was luxurious, with soft, pinkish lighting and a velvety bedspread. As soon as the door closed behind them, Deborah pulled Holly into a gentle embrace, her lips brushing against Holly’s ear. “You did great tonight,” she murmured.

“Thanks,” Holly whispered back, her hands trailing up Deborah’s back.

Deborah wrapped her arms around Holly’s waist, pulling her hips closer. She placed small kisses on her lips before making her way slowly down her neck. Holly found herself almost unable to control her breathing.

“Take everything off. Now,” commanded Deborah with an authority Holly wasn’t expecting.

“Yes, ma’am...”

As Holly took her clothes off as quickly as she could and fell to her back, wide open for Deborah to do whatever she wanted. Deborah wasted no time. She stuck out her tongue, tracing a line down from Holly’s perky breasts to her swollen clitoris. Holly moaned, her hands finding their way to Deborah’s hair, gripping it tightly and pushing her face down into her wetness.

“Fuck me, please. I need you,” she moaned.

Deborah did precisely as she was told, her tongue playing with Holly’s clit as she slipped two fingers inside her, gently sucking as she thrust upwards, moving her hand



in a firm, steady rhythm. Holly watched as Deborah lapped up her juices as if they had been denied her for years. Deborah's other hand moved up Holly's body, taking a nipple in between her fingers. She moaned into her, blowing air onto her whenever she took a breath to dive in for more. Holly could feel herself tightening around Deborah's fingers already, pulling them deeper inside her with every contraction.

"Oh, God! Yes, don't stop. That's the spot! Right there!" Holly moaned. She could feel her wetness pouring out of her as Deborah sucked harder. She had seen Deborah get into it before, but never like this. This was a new level of pleasure. She felt so wet and tight and... couldn't stop begging for more. Her pussy, inside and out, was burning with desire as Deborah continued to tend to her. It was perfect. Holly pushed Deborah's face down harder and lifted her hips, her desperate need for release growing as a loud moan escaped her.

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“Fuck! Yes!” she screamed, arching her back, her hands grabbing at the bedspread for a place to hold on. She came in Deborah’s mouth, hard, and then again. Three, to be exact. Deborah made her way up Holly’s body, her fingers still inside her, moving, still thrusting, her entire hand soaked in Holly’s juices. She continued to fuck her as their lips found each other, Holly’s tongue hastily looking for hers. Deborah continued to fuck her as Holly whispered,

“It’s your turn now.”

Holly pulled Deborah’s hips down into her thigh. Deborah moved her hips in rhythm to her fingers moving inside Holly, her clit rubbing against Holly’s legs.

“Come for me, Deborah. Come for me!” Holly whimpered. And it didn’t take any more than that. Deborah came hard onto Holly’s leg as Holly herself came again on Deborah’s hand. The attraction, chemistry and desire was so intense that neither of them had ever experienced such fast-paced orgasms like it ever before.

They both collapsed back on the bed. Deborah slowly pulled out her fingers, Holly moaning as the waves of pleasure slowly subsided.

“Is this a better end to your day?” Deborah asked.

“Um... just a bit!” she replied with a smile.

In that moment, Holly wanted to tell Deborah that her feelings had deepened beyond physical attraction. She was falling in love with this remarkable woman, which terrified her.

## DEBORAH

Deborah lay next to Holly, her heart still racing from the intensity of their encounter. The rocking of the yacht and the low, soft hum of the engines created a soothing background as she ran her fingers through Holly's hair. She couldn't help but smile as she watched the younger woman slowly drift into what looked like a peaceful sleep. The situation, what had happened between them and what kept happening between them, was more complicated than she could have ever imagined, and the fact that Esme, one of her closest friends, was likely to be soon involved only added to her anxiety. They were going to have to tell her.

Deborah sighed, her thoughts turning dark as they often did when she felt that familiar dread creeping upon her. She was developing strong feelings for Holly, of that she was sure. She had never met anyone like her. Sure, she'd had crushes in the past, and she'd been deeply in love with her ex-wife, but the implications of this new relationship were starting to weigh heavily on her mind. She had worked so hard to build her career, to regain her footing and confidence after the very public and painful divorce she'd been forced to endure. The tabloids had feasted on her personal life and had themselves a field day, and the experience had come very close to breaking her. Was she about to risk all that again? The mere thought of it was almost paralyzing. The same doubts circling in her mind continuously, yet Holly still found a way back into pants and heart.

As if conjured by her anxious, desperate thoughts, the door to the cabin suddenly burst open, and behind it stood Esme, her eyes widening in shock as she took in the scene before her. Deborah's heart somersaulted as she experienced a cold wave of fear.

"Esme!" Deborah gasped, scrambling to cover her bare breasts with the sheet. Holly

woke up, her mouth opening in horror as she realized her mother had caught them.

“What the fuck is this? Deborah? Jesus, no! Oh my god, no!” Esme’s voice was a mixture of disbelief and fury. She stomped into the cabin, her shocked face shifting from Deborah to Holly and then back again.

“Esme, listen. Let me explain what’s going on,” Deborah began, her voice trembling.

“Explain?” Esme repeated, her tone incredulous. “You think there’s anything in the world that can explain this? You’ve got to be kidding me, Deborah! You’re fucking my daughter! You’re in bed... naked... with my goddam daughter. This is beyond. My daughter and my best friend... screwing? I can’t even... I can’t even believe my eyes.”

Holly sat up, trying to clutch back some of the sheets Deborah had grabbed. “Mom, please! Don’t use language like that. We’re not screwing!”

“Oh? Really? You’re just having yourselves a naked little nap here, are you? Well, isn’t that nice? The party got too much for you. You found this cabin, lay down for a little nap... and I suppose your clothes just fell right off you both, right? That’s weird.”

“Mom! Would you stop already?”

“Stay out of this, Holly!” Esme snapped, her eyes blazing with anger. “This has to come from Deborah.”

Deborah took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. “Esme, please. I’m so sorry. This wasn’t how either of us wanted you to find out. Holly and I... we met at the wedding and?—”

“You didn’t meet at my goddam wedding, Debs! You met her when she was a little kid. Or did you forget? Who fucks their best friend’s kid? What, are you insane? Did you lose your mind? Isn’t this illegal?”

“Um... Mom? I’m 25. A little perspective, please.”

“She knew you when you were five. It’s sick is what it is.”

“It’s not sick. We’ve developed feelings for each other. It wasn’t planned. It just happened. Holly and I have been seeing each other, and?—”

“Feelings?” Esme echoed, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Ha! Do you think this is about feelings? Do you even have any, Deborah? I thought you’d sworn off sex for life. But no! How wrong was I? Here you are, hooking up with my Hols! Do you think this is about feelings? This is a total betrayal, Deborah! For fuck’s sake! I trusted you. You were supposed to be helping Holly, giving her an internship, not... seducing her! Wait til the board of directors at Webflix hears about this! Fucking an underage intern!”

“MOM! I’m twenty-fucking-five years old!”

“Well, SHE’S about seventy-fucking-five years old!”

Deborah flinched at the accusation and the cruel putdown. “I guess I need to keep up with the Botox. Esme, I never meant to hurt you. I care about Holly. I care about her deeply. This wasn’t something either of us planned or took lightly. We’re not just hooking up. It’s something that was out of our control. It just... happened. I hadn’t seen her for so long. She didn’t post all over social media, so I didn’t even know it was her at your party. It’s been years and years since I last saw her before the wedding. She didn’t tell me she was your daughter until after it happened.”

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Esme crossed her arms, her face a mask of anger and hurt. “Out of control? You’re out of fucking control, Debs. It just happened. Nice! Is that your excuse? Do you have any idea what this could do to her? Getting involved with the likes of you? Can’t you even see what this could do to her future? She’s too young, Deborah. Her life hasn’t even started. She doesn’t need you and all your... dramas. She doesn’t need you leading her on and breaking her god-damn heart. And I don’t need you fucking my daughter!!!”

Deborah felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. She was losing control of the situation, and the fear of public exposure loomed large. Would Esme really tell the board about this? Why would she? Didn’t all those years of friendship mean anything to her? “Esme, we like each other. Well, I like her. And I believe she feels the same way. I know this is hard to understand, but our feelings are real. I’m shocked too. I was going to make it all stop, but my feelings took over.”

Holly reached out, taking her mother’s hand. “Mom, please. Would you listen to her? I know this must have been a shock, but we didn’t do this to hurt you. Deborah and I want to get what we’ve got a go.”

Esme stared back at Holly, her expression softening ever so slightly, but the pain in her eyes was still evident. She shook her head slowly. “I’m not saying all this for my benefit, Holly. It’s about you and what’s best for you. Deborah, I thought you, of all people, would understand that. I was there for you with everything that happened with your ex. The way they were talking about you in the press! And on social media. You had journalists going through your goddamn garbage at night! How many calls were made to your office? To your associates? Christ! Everyone knew every last detail of your love life.”

“I know, I know. We’d be discreet, Es. It won’t be like last time. We’re not talking about marriage and kids here. Holly and I are just getting to know each other?—”

“Well, it looks like more than that to me!”

“Yeah, this is getting awkward now. Who has a full-blown debate with their parent while they’re naked in bed with their girlfriend? This can’t be right. Why don’t we call time out on this and get together to talk about it when we’re all fully clothed?”

Deborah swallowed back a sob. She could sense Esme’s disappointment and was desperate to appease her. “I understand, Esme. And you know me. Better than anyone, I reckon. I would never do anything to hurt Holly. That’s not my style. You should be pleased Cam didn’t see her, right? I’m not your typical heartbreaker. I want to support her. I’d love to help her find her path. Please trust me on this, Es.”

Esme stepped back, her shoulders sagging as if the weight of what she’d just learned about her daughter was too much to bear. “I just don’t know what to think right now. I will need some time to process this,” she said.

Holly smiled at her mother. “Mom, we’re not asking you to be okay with this. Not right away. We get it. But please... give us a chance. Give us a chance to prove to you—and to everyone because they’re all going to find out—that this isn’t a mistake.”

Esme looked between her daughter and Deborah, her conflicting thoughts evident in her eyes. Finally, she shrugged her shoulders and turned to leave the cabin. “We’ll talk about this later. Make yourselves decent and come back up on the deck. People will start talking, Holly. I’m so disappointed in you.”

“Mom... you knew I was gay, right?”

“Of course! That’s not the issue, and you know it. Listen, I’m trying to settle into married life. It’s weird. You know I’ve always been a bit of a... well, a loner, I guess.”

“No, Mom. You’ve always been the life and soul.”

“On the outside, maybe. But I don’t belong to Nora’s world. I love the bones of the woman, but I’m way more comfortable polishing glasses behind a bar and listening to people’s problems than tottering around on boats with all these real estate...”

“Freaks?” interjected Holly, causing her mother to laugh.

“Yeah! Something like that,” Esme agreed.

“And you know something? You’re right. You have always listened to people’s problems, so please listen to mine. I want to be with Deborah... and my mother disapproves. I adore my mom more than anything, and it will tear me apart. What should I do?”

“Get dressed. We’ll talk about it later.”

As Esme walked out, Deborah felt a mixture of relief and dread. The secret was out, and the path ahead was uncertain. She turned to Holly, who watched her mother leave with a pained expression, her shoulders trembling slightly.

“Holly? How are you feeling?” Deborah asked with a gentle tone.

Holly shook her head, and Deborah watched with concern as her young lover’s tears glistened in her eyes. “Yeah, I think I’m okay. I just... I’m just hoping she’ll get her head around this eventually.”



Deborah pulled Holly into her arms, holding her tightly. “I want you, Holly. I’ve never wanted anyone this badly. It’s as if we just fit. Don’t ask me why. I guess the age gap is a bit weird. I don’t know anything about surfing. I’m not a party girl. I haven’t listened to a new song since 1998, you know? I’m pretty old-school when it comes to romance. But we’ll get through this together. I promise. I want to know you.”

“God, and I want to know you. Inside and out,” Holly said with a smile as she pushed her hand under the covers and traced her fingers over Deborah’s soft skin. “When I’m not with you, I crave being with you. All I want to do is kiss you, lick you, taste you... I want to know every single part of your body. I swear I could worship you, Deborah. It’s like I know you. I know what you like without having to ask. Isn’t that odd? I feel so insanely attracted to you on every level. I know I’m younger than you, but age is just a number to me.”

“Tell me about it. Almost as soon as I walked in the door last night after our little fight?—”

“It wasn’t a fight.”

“I know. But I couldn’t handle it. I couldn’t get you out of my head. And when I got home, even though I was supposed to be sorting out dinner for some bigwigs that came over last night, I had to rush to the bedroom and touch myself. I came so hard, Holly. You make me come so hard. You make me feel alive again.”

Still, fear gnawed at her. She had a high-profile job, and her life was often all over social media. The idea of everyone talking about them, the headlines she was already imagining, and the scrutiny of her friends and family made her break out in a cold sweat. She wasn’t sure she could handle it. She had barely survived her divorce, and the idea of going through something similar again made her feel sick.

“Deborah,” Holly said softly, looking back into her eyes. “I can tell what you’re thinking. We can do this, you know? I don’t care what people think. I’m not afraid.”

“You’ve only just got back to the States. People don’t know who you are.”

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“Maybe. But I’m Nora Hartley’s new stepdaughter, right? Weird. I hadn’t thought of it like that until now. And she’s just as well-known as you are, I think. I may not have a lot to lose, personally, but I sure don’t want to see my mom’s name dragged through the mud. I don’t want people talking about her at the Indigo Lounge. She’s worked too hard for that place. So, I’ve got as much to lose as you have. But I’m ready and willing to risk it all. Because it’s not that big a deal, okay?”

“It IS a big deal!” Deborah responded, almost shouting.

“It isn’t! My mom’s in a blind panic, and you’re a lot like her in some ways. So there’s twenty years between us. And? We’re both consenting adults. I’m not after you for your money. Honestly, I didn’t even know about your money at first. I’m after you because you’re a lot of fun to be around, and I can make you come in under a minute, which is always handy.”

“So, it’s just a sex thing?” Deborah asked, a sense of concern in her voice.

“Not at all. I’m just teasing you. Sex with you is mind-blowing. But so is just being with you. Drinking coffee, sitting silently, talking... Hell, even fighting with you is amazing. Mini-fighting. Whatever.”

Deborah envied Holly’s confidence and defiance. She wished she could share it, but the scars of her past were too deep. “I admire your courage, Holly. You’re amazing. But this isn’t just about us. It’s about my career, reputation, and friends at the Indigo Lounge, including your mom and Nora. I don’t know if I can handle their rejection.”

“Then let them reject us,” Holly replied, her voice steady. “Do we care? If they can’t

accept us as we are and the feelings we have for each other, then they're not our friends. What sort of lesbians are they, anyway? We met in a goddam queer bar!"

Deborah so wished it could be that simple. She had been friends with Esme and the gang at the Indigo Lounge for years, and the thought of losing them was unbearable. "I'm scared, Holly. I don't know if I'm strong enough for this. I'll have to tell you about my divorce when the time's right. It's a tough story to tell, though. And tough to hear."

Holly cupped Deborah's face in her hands. "You're so much stronger than you think. Just remember that I'll be with you every step of the way, alright?"

Deborah closed her eyes, leaning into Holly's touch. She wanted to believe that everything would be okay, that their love could withstand the challenges ahead. But there was still that niggling doubt in the back of her mind. She didn't dare voice her concerns again, though.

"We'll take it one day at a time," Deborah whispered, kissing Holly's forehead. "We'll figure it out, sweetie."

8

## HOLLY

Holly pushed open the door to the gym, the scent of fresh sweat and determination hitting her as she walked in. It was early, but the gym was already buzzing with activity. She couldn't believe how many people woke up this early to work out. She guessed it had much to do with living in one of the hippest neighborhoods in L.A. She needed this time to herself, so she felt slightly disappointed when she first saw the crowd. A hard workout would do her a world of good. She needed to clear her mind and push away the whirlwind of emotions that had been tearing at her since her

mother had walked in on her and Deborah.

As she made her way to the weight section, she spotted Cam. She didn't know Cam all that well but had chatted with her a few times down at the Indigo Lounge. Cam was in the middle of a set, her muscles rippling under the strain. Holly admired Cam's dedication and discipline and crossed her fingers that if she worked hard, she might look half as ripped in a couple of months. She approached, waiting until Cam finished her last rep.

"Hey there, Cam," Holly said, trying to sound casual, although if she was honest with herself, she felt slightly intimidated by the gym bunny.

Cam set the weights down and turned to Holly, a playful grin spreading across her face. "Well, well, if it isn't Ms. Holly Morgan! What brings you here so early?"

"Huh? Oh, I get it. So, you know about me and Deborah. Very funny. You're a real card, Cam."

"Sorry. What is your name anyway? Bloom? Did your mom change her name when she got married? Why don't I know that already? Nah, she's too much of a feminist, right? I can't see our Esme Bloom as an Esme Hartley. Although the name Hartley could get you a long way in this town, let me tell you. You should change your name. Holly Hartley. It has a nice ring to it."

"Are you fucking high or something? Why would I take Nora's name? She married my mom, is all. She didn't fucking adopt me."

"Well, she can adopt me anytime she likes," Cam laughed. "You're lucky. I'd love a stepmom like that one. The things I'd do to her. Stepmom action has always been my go-to on Lezhub, you know?"

“Eww. Gross. What the fuck, Cam?”

“Come on! I know you’re into it! Deborah? Seriously? What, she must be like 30... 40 years older than you, right?”

Holly sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Listen up. I don’t have time for this. I came here because I needed to clear my head. It’s been a rough few days.”

Cam raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Do tell. Debs likes it rough, does she? I can’t remember. I don’t think we’ve banged. I can’t be too sure, though. Some nights down at the Indigo can get pretty wild. I wake up with memory gaps.”

“You haven’t banged.”

“Okay. Fair enough.”

Holly hesitated for a moment before diving in. Cam was annoying, yet likeable. “You must know my mom caught us in the act, right? Well, we’d just finished, but still...”

Cam’s eyes widened slightly, but she quickly masked her surprise. “Lucky you! I can picture your mom’s face! Fuck me! Imagine if she walked in when you were elbow-deep in her BFF. Anyway, go on.”

Holly took a deep breath and explained everything—the start of her relationship with Deborah, how the affair had become more than just a couple of hook-ups, the confrontation with her mother, and the tangled mess of emotions she was now dealing with. Cam listened intently, her expression softening with understanding.

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“Wow, Holly. That’s kind of a lot, right? And I can tell you’re not dealing,” Cam said when Holly finished. She leaned in a little closer, a mischievous glint in her eye. “You know, I’m always here if you ever need to talk more. Or, you know, we could take this to the showers and continue our conversation there.”

Holly’s jaw dropped in shock, and she vigorously shook her head. “Cam, do you just go about our business all day flirting with everyone you meet?”

Cam grinned. “Guilty as charged. But seriously, I know you’ve only been back in the States recently, so if you need a friend, I could be therefor you. Just platonically. I hear you. You’re falling head-over-heels in love with Ms. Debs, who, I have to admit, is quite the hottie, so I don’t blame you. She has the ass of a goddess.”

“That’s enough, Cam. Drop it.”

“Sorry. I’m always on the campaign trail, you see?”

“Really? You’re in politics?”

“I’m single-handedly trying to MAQA.”

“And that means what exactly?”

“Make American Queer Again. Okay, so it never was, but I won’t let that get in the way of a good joke, right?”

“It wasn’t that great a joke.”

“I think you’re just on a downer. You’re ruining my vibe, Hols. I pick up a lot of women at this gym. So push off, would you? I’ll catch you at the bar later. Or my offer still stands for the shower because I’m not the type to hold a grudge.”

Holly politely declined. “I’ll pass on the shower chat. Besides, this place has individual cubicles. It’s an expensive gym, remember?”

Cam laughed. “Alright, keep it real, Holly. Just know you’re not alone. If you don’t want to hang out, you’ll find plenty of people to talk to down at Indigo. Don’t be a stranger, right?”

Holly felt a bit lighter after talking to Cam. She also could see that Cam’s flirty, confident bravado was all just a front covering up some deep, underlying insecurities.

She got in her workout, pushing her body until her muscles burned and her mind was blank. But the clarity was fleeting. As soon as she left the gym, the weight of the situation crashed back down on her.

Back at her apartment, Holly decided to cook herself a meal, hoping the familiar routine would offer some comfort. She chopped vegetables with practiced precision, her mind wandering back to Deborah with every swipe of the blade. The pain in Deborah’s eyes and her fear and vulnerability haunted Holly.

As she moved a pan of oil to the stove, a sudden searing pain shot through her hand. She had misjudged and touched the hot pan. She hissed, pulling her hand back and running it under cold water. The pain was sharp and immediate, a blatant contrast to the inner turmoil she had been feeling.

And in that moment, she realized something. Physical pain was straightforward. It hurt, but it was easy to understand and easy to manage. Atworst, you took a trip to the hospital, right? Emotional pain, though, was a whole different story. She had lived a



relatively easy life, shielded from deep emotional suffering. Her mom had always taken great care of her. But Deborah—Deborah had been through hell. Her divorce, the public scrutiny, the betrayal—those scars were sure to run deep, and all Holly was doing was adding to that suffering.

I'm such a shit. Why can't I leave the woman alone? Maybe I've pushed her too hard?

Feeling a surge of determination, Holly knew she had to make things right. She needed to show Deborah that she understood and was willing to help her face her fears and insecurities.

Just then, her phone beeped. It was a Whatsup message from her mom.

CALL ME.

Jeez? Capitals? Boomer much?Holly thought to herself.

She decided it was better to call her than face her mother's wrath later.

"Hi, Mom. How are things? You wanted me to call. Is it something urgent?"

Esme's voice was thick with emotion. "Holly, honey, I'm so glad you called back so quickly.Thank you. It's... it's Nora. We had a huge fight. I'm talking HUGE. This never happens to us. Well, hardly ever, right? I can't remember the last time we fought. She's not like that. We only just got married. What hope do we have if we're having huge fights this soon? Isn't this supposed to be our honeymoon period? She hasn't even got time to go on a honeymoon—but here she is, plenty of time to come at me now! It's unbelievable."

Holly's heart sank. "What happened exactly? Slow down, Mom. You're talking at a

gazillion miles an hour right now.”

“It’s about you and Deborah,” Esme said, her voice breaking. “Nora is worried about how it might affect her business. There have been some funny calls from her clients this morning, and... she thinks your relationship might be the cause of it.”

Holly clenched her fist, trying to keep her anger in check. “Mom, that’s ridiculous. There’s just no way that can be true. You only found out about us yesterday. Our relationship has nothing to do with Nora’s business. How would her clients even know?”

“I have no idea.”

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“I think you do. I mean, Cam knew. I bumped into her at the gym this morning. It’s a great place, by the way. Thanks for the membership, Mom. Anyway, this Cam chick knew all about me and Deborah. How come?”

“I know, sweetheart. I was crying on the yacht last night. I was in shock. You have to understand, baby. People overheard me, and you know how these things spread like wildfire. But Nora... She’s been under a lot of stress, and it all came out tonight. She said some awful things, and I-I couldn’t take it.”

Holly could hear the tears in her mother’s voice, and it broke her heart. “Mom, I’m so sorry. This is all so unfair to you. None of this is your fault. Maybe I’ve been selfish. It must have come as a shock to you last night. I’m sorry if I was rude. I can be impulsive sometimes. And rude.”

Esme sniffled. “I just don’t know what to do, Holly. I love you, and I want you to be happy. But Nora... she’s my wife, and I must also consider her feelings. She was furious.”

“At the same time, Mom... I can’t help who I develop feelings for. I didn’t mean for Nora to get caught up in all this. Didn’t she have a thought for me? I’m her wife’s daughter. I might be falling in love. Seriously, Mom, how many millions—billions—will be enough for that woman? I’m seeing huge red flags here.”

Holly took a deep breath. “Mom, you have to stand up for what’s right. Our relationship isn’t something to be ashamed of. Deborah and I are really into each other, and we deserve to be happy. Nora may need to rethink her priorities if she can’t accept that. She’s part of this family now and should know better.”

Esme was silent for a moment. “You’re right, Holly. I know you’re right. It’s just so hard.”

“I know, Mom. But you guys will work it out. I know it. Was this over the phone?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you’ll just have to wait until she gets home tonight and talk it through over dinner. It’ll be fine.”

Esme sighed. “I hope so, honey. I do.”

Holly felt a surge of protective anger. “Mom, you have to take care of yourself too. Don’t let Nora’s stress become a burden you have to carry. I get the impression she puts her job first sometimes.”

“I guess that’s true. But then, so do I.”

“Sure. But my relationship, whoever I choose to be with, shouldn’t be the cause of such pain.”

“I’ll try to calm her down, Holly,” Esme muttered quietly. “I’ll talk to her again. But she can be such a stubborn piece of work.”

“Yes, I know,” Holly said. “But remember, family comes first—always.”

“But you just said she was family.”

“Technically, yes. But she needs to start acting like it.”

“I guess so, sweetheart,” Esme whispered. “You know I want you to be happy. This

came out of the blue, honey. I think we're all having a hard time dealing with it."

"I know, Mom. And I want you to be happy too. Let's find a way to figure it out."

Esme's voice was a mix of relief and lingering worry. "Okay, Holly. I'll talk to you later. I love you."

Holly decided to make her way to Deborah's apartment later that evening, her heart pounding with anticipation and anxiety. Deborah answered the door, looking surprised but not unwelcoming.

"Holly," Deborah said softly. "What are you doing here? Did we have plans? I've been so stressed; I must have forgotten. You'll never believe what happened to me today. My PA, my personal fucking assistant, called me a cradle snatcher. A cradle snatcher! At least, I think that's what she said. She was supposed to be getting coffee for everyone in the meeting. She was taking orders, and I swear I heard her whisper it under her breath just as she walked past my chair. Now, I know she's good friends with Ruby. I don't think you know Ruby. Maybe you do. She's always down at the Indigo, sitting with the same espresso for hours on end. She's a writer. Or a wannabe writer. Or something. Actually, I really like her. Or I liked her, at least. But she's good friends with Mel, my assistant. I don't know why they're friends. They have zilch in common. Mel's all about hair and makeup. I swear to God, I've caught her on that TokTok thing the youngsters are all on so many times; it's unreal. Anyway, I'm pretty sure she must have been talking because?—"

"God, Deborah! Listen to yourself! You're actually ranting right now. Do you hear yourself? You sound like my mom. Is that what they taught you at that college of yours? Were you on the debate team? I bet once you start, you don't stop monologuing for, like, 40 minutes, and it's fucking nuts! Also, it's TikTok. How can you not know that? Aren't you, like, in charge of the fucking Internet or something?"

“I’m so sorry. No, just a streaming service. I don’t have much to do with the Internet.”

Although she tried to hold it in, Holly couldn’t help but laugh. “I came here because I needed to see you,” Holly replied. “Can we talk?”

Deborah nodded and led Holly to the kitchen. As Deborah began making coffee, Holly sat at the table, gathering her thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” Holly started, her voice trembling slightly. “I didn’t really understand what you were going through. I was so caught up in my own feelings that I didn’t see how much pain you were in. I can be a bit spoiled sometimes. It’s something I need to work on.”

Deborah paused, her back to Holly as she prepared the coffee. “It’s not easy for me, Holly. I’ve been hurt so badly before. I don’t know if I can go through that again.”

Holly’s heart ached to hear the pain in Deborah’s voice. “I know. I can’t pretend to understand fully, but I want to. I want to be there for you, to help you overcome this.”

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Deborah turned with two cups of coffee in her hands. She set one in front of Holly and sat down across from her. “It’s just... I’m terrified. The public scrutiny, the judgment—it’s overwhelming.”

Holly reached across the table, taking Deborah’s hand. “You don’t have to face it alone. Listen, my mom’s upset, too. She had a huge fight with Nora about us. It’s a mess.”

Deborah looked down at their joined hands, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Holly, I don’t want to lose you, but I’m so scared. Our relationship already seems to be causing ripples all over the place. I want you so badly. I think about you day and night. All I want to do is spend time with you and learn everything there is to know about you. But look at what’s happening already!”

Holly squeezed her hand gently. “You won’t lose me. I’m not going anywhere. You’re strong, Deborah. You’ve been through so much, and you’ve come out the other side. What’s a little gossip, right?”

Deborah’s lips trembled as she spoke. “I don’t want to lose my friends, my support system. The people at work—they’re just colleagues. That Mel has never been on my side. She’s got such a bug up her ass. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. But Esme, the Indigo gang—they all mean so much to me.”

“I so get that,” Holly said softly. “I’ve got an amazing group of friends from Australia I’m still in touch with. And I would never want to come between you and your friends. But I believe in us. I believe we can make it work without losing the people we care about.”

Deborah took a deep breath, her eyes searching Holly's. "The fear of being judged, of being talked about... it's crippling."

Holly nodded. "I know. But we can't let fear control our lives. We have to fight for what we want, for who we want to love."

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## DEBORAH

Deborah stood at the window of her apartment, staring into the void below. She could just about make out the twinkling lights down in the valley and vaguely noticed that there were a lot of people out and about for breakfast already. But she registered no more detail than that. Holly's words from the previous night echoed in her mind, filling her with a mixture of hope and fear. She had actually said the L-word. Wasn't it too soon? Was this just a crush? The types that young women are so prone to? She turned away from the window and looked at Holly, who was sitting on the couch, flicking through her phone messages.

"I've been thinking a lot about what you said," Deborah began, her voice hesitant but determined.

Holly glanced up, her eyebrows raised in curiosity. "You know what? Last night was the first night we ever spent together, and we didn't lay a hand on each other. That's kind of off. What was up with that? Why invite me to spend the night and then totally ignore me?" Holly's tone was playful, but there was a glint of hurt in her eyes.

"I was tired, Holly. I must have fallen asleep." Deborah tried to sound casual, but the words felt hollow even to her own ears.

"Not true. I was flicking through TikTok until the early hours, and you were tossing



and turning all night. I'd say you hardly slept a wink. Done with me already, huh?" Holly teased, but her eyes searched Deborah's face for answers.

"No. You know I'm not. I've been thinking about what you said about not letting fear control our lives, and I realized you're right. I don't want to live in fear anymore. I know your mom's hurting, and she knows I care for her so much. As my mom used to say, it'll all come out in the wash."

"What now?" Holly asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Oh, she had a heap of funny sayings." Deborah's lips curved into a small smile as she remembered her mother.

Holly's face lit up. "I'm so glad you think so, Debs. Your mom was right. We'll wash it. It'll be fine."

Deborah took a deep breath, feeling a sense of resolve come over her. "Let's do something wild. We need to get out of here. I haven't gone on a bender for years."

"A bender?" Holly asked, laughing.

"Another funny saying, I guess. Sorry. We need a break. If we leave the city for a while, everyone can talk about us while we're gone. They'll get it all out of their systems, and we'll have a clean slate by the time we return. What do you say?"

Holly's grin widened, and she reached to take Deborah's hand. "How wild are we talking? Like sex dungeons and mojitos or fishing and flasks of rum?"

Deborah chuckled, shaking her head. "I think you've had some pretty weird nights out in your short time on this earth, honey. I had a different idea. No dungeons. No fish. How about we go on a minibreak to Paris? Just you and me. We can explore the

city, have fun, and get to know each other.”

Deborah felt a flutter of excitement as she waited for Holly’s answer.

“Paris sounds perfect. Let’s do it.”

The flight to Paris was filled with laughter, light conversation, and people watching. It felt so good to chat about the weather and places they’d visited compared with the heavy emotions of the past few days. By the time they arrived at their hotel, both Deborah and Holly were buzzing with excitement.

“I’m a little disappointed we didn’t join the Mile High Club,” giggled Holly as they checked in.

“Shhhh!” whispered Deborah, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “The staff here probably speak perfect English.”

“Oh, right,” Holly replied as she turned a dark shade of pink.

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“We’ll do it on the way home, okay?” whispered Deborah before giving Holly a sneaky wink.

Their first stop was a quaint little café near the Eiffel Tower. They sat outside, enjoying the warm summer breeze and the delicious pastries.

“These croissants are to die for. They don’t taste like this back home, do they? We need to tell people about this. Let’s kidnap the baker and set him up at the Indigo Lounge. Your mom would be a millionaire.”

“And then she could leave Nora, and we’d all live happily ever after.”

“Come on now, Holly. That’s not fair. Nora just had a natural reaction.”

“Okay, let’s just forget about Nora and move on to a serious question,” Holly said, a mischievous glint in her eye. “If you could have dinner with any three people, dead or alive, who would they be? And you can’t include Nora.”

Deborah laughed, her eyes twinkling playfully. “That’s a tough one. Let’s see... I’d choose Audrey Hepburn because I’ve always admired her grace and elegance. Jane Austen would probably be there because I’d love to pick her brain about her novels. There’s never been a writer like her since. And lastly, Barack Obama, because I find his perspective on life and politics fascinating. And we need him right now.”

“Fair enough but, we need his wife. Plus, she’s hot, right?”

“Yep. Pretty hot.”

“Great choices,” Holly said, nodding appreciatively. “For me, it would be Frida Kahlo because her art and life story are so inspiring. Plus, I do like a monobrow on a woman.”

“Is that why you picked me?” Deborah teased as she raised her eyebrows and squashed them together with her fingertips.

“Totally. Then, maybe David Bowie because he was David Bowie, and I reckon that’s a bit of a no-brainer. Lastly, my grandmother, because she passed away when I was really little, and I wish I’d known her better.”

Deborah smiled, feeling a warmth spread through her. “I just so love that. What interesting choices. And I had no idea you were a Bowie fan. That’s not your era. It’s only just my era!”

“Wait up... But I thought you were fifty years older than me. He’d be way after your time, wouldn’t he?”

“No. It’s the jetlag playing tricks on you. Seriously though, let’s make that the last joke about my age. We’ll be hearing enough of those jokes when we get back home, no doubt. And I want to soak up the culture and grow a few new brain cells while we’re here.”

“Agreed, Debs.”

They grew closer as they continued exploring Paris, visiting the Louvre, strolling along the Seine, and sampling the local cuisine. Each moment was filled with laughter and shared stories, peeling back the layers of their lives and revealing their true selves to each other.

Back in their hotel room that night, Holly suggested they play the 36 Questions

Game. Deborah agreed, intrigued by the idea of deepening their bond even further. She'd heard Mel talking about it over lunch one day but hadn't really understood. It was something along the lines of either being in or out of love by the end of the question session. She knew that no series of questions could cause her to lose interest in Holly. Not at this point, so she was ready to experiment.

"Okay, first question," Holly began, sitting cross-legged on the bed, her nipples catching Deborah's eye. "If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?"

Deborah thought for a moment. "I think I'd want the ability to read minds. It would make understanding people much easier, don't you think?"

Holly laughed, shaking her head. "True, but it could also be overwhelming. Imagine hearing everyone's thoughts all the time."

"Good point," Deborah conceded, then smirked. "I don't think you'd want to hear mine right now. What about you?"

"I do! I do want to hear!" Holly protested.

"I was imagining ripping off your nightgown and spending the best part of tonight and tomorrow with my body against yours."

Holly burst into laughter, her cheeks flushing. "Ha ha! All in good time, Deborah. Oh, look how hard my nipples are! They're listening!"

"What ability would you choose?"

"I'd want the ability to heal people," Holly said thoughtfully. "There's so much suffering in the world and being able to take that away would be amazing. I'd like to

have healing hands or something.”

Deborah felt her chest swell with affection. “You have such a big heart, Holly. And your hands have certainly healed me, let me tell you.”

“You’re quite the little flirt tonight, Ms. Morgan. I’m loving it.”

They continued through the questions, their answers bringing new insights into each other’s lives.

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“What’s your most treasured memory?” Holly asked, her eyes softening.

Deborah smiled wistfully. “I think it’s a tie between the day I got married?—”

“Don’t make me jealous now,” Holly teased, but there was a hint of genuine curiosity in her eyes.

“No need. We all know how that ended.”

“Actually, I don’t.”

“And the day I graduated. Both were moments of immense pride and happiness.”

Holly nodded. “For me, it’s probably the day I got my first art exhibit. In Australia. Seeing my work appreciated by others was incredibly fulfilling.”

“What? I knew nothing about any of this. Are you an artist? I had you down as the sporty type. I thought you worked in a surfboard shop or something?”

“Sure, the surf shop, a few bars... whatever I could get. But I paint—oils, portraits.”

“Wow. This makes you even hotter.”

As the night went on, they moved to more intimate questions, their connection deepening with every answer.

“What do you value most in a friendship or a relationship?” Holly asked, her eyes

searching Deborah's.

"Loyalty and trust," Deborah replied without hesitation. "Having someone who's always there for you, no matter what. It's got to be that, right?"

"I feel the same way. That's why I cherish what we have, Deborah.

Deborah felt a surge of emotion. "Oh, Holly. Me too. More than anything. You have no idea."

They continued talking late into the night, exploring each other's dreams, fears and hopes for the future. By the time they finally fell asleep, curled up in each other's arms, Deborah felt such a real sense of peace and happiness that she hadn't felt in years.

The following day, they woke up early and decided to visit Montmartre. Walking through the charming, cobbled streets, they stumbled upon a small art studio.

"Let's go in," Holly suggested. "This place looks incredible."

The studio was filled with beautiful oil paintings, sketches, murals, and sculptures. Holly's entire face lit up as she admired the artwork, and Deborah couldn't help but feel a deep admiration for her passion.

"This place is like nothing I've ever seen," Holly said, turning to Deborah. "I could spend hours here. I wonder if these are all local artists. God, the French sure know what they're doing. I'd kill for talent like this."

Deborah squeezed her by the shoulders. "I love seeing you this happy. And I can't wait to see your work. You will show me when we get home, won't you?"



Holly leaned in and kissed her gently. “Of course I will. I’ll paint you. In the nude. Like one of the French girls. Thank you for bringing me here, Deborah. For everything.”

Deborah’s heart skipped a beat. “No, thank you, Holly. You’ve taught me something about taking risks. I can’t believe I met you when I did.”

They spent the rest of the day exploring, visiting the Sacré-Cœur, and enjoying the stunning views of Paris. That evening, they returned to their hotel, exhausted but happy.

As they sat on the balcony, looking out over the twinkling lights of Paris, Deborah felt a profound sense of contentment. She turned to Holly, her heart full.

“I love you, Holly,” she said softly.

Holly’s eyes filled with tears. “I love you too, Deborah.”

“Let’s make a promise,” Deborah said, taking Holly’s hand. “No matter what happens, we’ll always be honest with each other and face everything together.”

Holly nodded, a smile spreading across her face. “I promise.”

Deborah felt at peace. She had finally found the courage to embrace her feelings for Holly. She knew back home it would be more complex, but lost in the romance in France, she could shut the real world away.

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The following morning, the sun peeked through the thin curtains of their hotel room, casting a golden glow on Holly's hair. Deborah watched her momentarily, feeling a warm flutter in her chest. They had planned to visit a quaint café that Deborah had read about, nestled in the heart of Paris. For a moment she wished they could stay in France together forever and leave all the forthcoming drama behind.

As they wandered through the narrow streets near Saint-Sulpice Church, the aroma of freshly baked bread and brewing coffee wafted through the air. Deborah felt an overwhelming sense of belonging. It was as if this moment was exactly where she was meant to be. They found the café—a small, charming place with ivy creeping up the walls and just a few tables outside. They took a seat, and soon, a miserable-looking waiter approached them.

“Bonjour, mesdames. What do you want?” he asked while forcing a smile through his teeth.

Deborah ordered a cappuccino, while Holly opted for a croissant and an espresso. As they waited for their order, they chatted about their plans for the day. The café was bustling with activity, yet it felt like they were in their own little world, wrapped in each other's presence.

“I can't wait! There is so much to do and so much to see! How do Parisians ever get any work done? There's no way I could stay cooped up in an office all day if I lived somewhere as beautiful as this,” exclaimed Holly in a bright voice.

“I'm guessing the waiter must live in the suburbs, right? He's certainly not full of the joys of Paris, is he? Have you ever seen such a grump? That's the difference, right?”

We're all fake grins and compliments in L.A. because half the population lives off tips. They're unionized over here. That waiter couldn't care less whether we're here or not."

"Or whether we have to wait 15 minutes for our order. Jeez, I bet he wouldn't even help if one of us dropped down dead. What a creep."

"Let's not let him ruin our day."

Their conversation was interrupted by a loud crash inside the café. Deborah turned to see the red-faced and flustered waiter lying under a dropped tray of dishes. The café fell silent for a moment, then erupted into laughter and sympathetic claps. The waiter gave an embarrassed bow before quickly retreating to the kitchen. Deborah couldn't help but chuckle, feeling second-hand embarrassment and relief that she wasn't in his shoes.

"That poor guy," Deborah said, laughing. "I hope he's okay."

"Screw that dude," Holly answered. "Where's my espresso!"

A waitress brought their drinks out just a couple of minutes later, and as Deborah took a sip of her cappuccino, she felt the creamy foam tickle her lips. The coffee's rich flavor was perfect, and she sighed contentedly. They spent the next hour at the café, enjoying the food, the atmosphere, and each other's company. Deborah felt like she was on a cloud, her happiness bubbling from within like champagne.

Later, after a quick lunch at an indoor farmer's market, they decided to visit the famous Shakespeare and Company bookstore. As a lover of literature, Deborah had always dreamed of coming here. The moment they walked in, she was enveloped by the smell of old books and the quiet hum of whispers and rustling pages. Holly immediately headed for the poetry section while Deborah browsed through the

shelves of classic novels. She picked up a worn copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and flipped through its yellowed pages, feeling a sense of nostalgia.

“This place is magical. I read this in high school. I’m a huge fan,” she whispered to Holly, who was now beside her with a stack of poetry books in her arms.

“It really is,” Holly replied. “I could spend hours here. I want these—all of them.”

Deborah couldn’t stop laughing. “We can stay as long as you like, and you can read what you want, but we can’t get more than a couple of books in our luggage.”

As they continued to explore the bookstore, they stumbled upon a small reading nook in the corner. It was cozy, with a couple of armchairs and a lamp casting a warm glow. They sat down on a velvet sofa, Holly reading aloud from one of her poetry books while Deborah listened, her head resting on Holly’s shoulder. The rhythmic cadence of Holly’s voice was soothing, and Deborah felt herself getting lost in the words.

When they finally left the bookstore, the sun was beginning to set. They walked hand in hand along the Seine. Deborah felt an overwhelming sense of peace. This day had been perfect in every way, and she knew that these memories would stay with her forever.

In that moment, with the city of Paris as their backdrop, Deborah knew that she had found something truly special. Her love for Holly was a beautiful adventure, and she couldn’t wait to see where it would take them next.

As Holly looked out from the balcony of their Paris hotel room for the last time, the City of Lights seemed to match the glow she felt within perfectly. The Eiffel Tower stood like a giant guarding the city streets in the distance.

Wow. Is this for real? Do people wake up to this every day? It's wild.

Holly turned her gaze back to Deborah, who was still peacefully sleeping. Paris had really deepened their feelings for one another, and each moment of their trip was infused with romance and discovery.

The quaint bistros, the curt waiting staff, the stunning art galleries—they had all somehow helped seal the bond between them with their magic. Paris had a glow about it, day and night. The city had cocooned them, making their lives back in L.A. feel distant and irrelevant. It was in these moments that Holly felt the most connected to Deborah as if their souls were intertwined as one.

But she knew that what had happened between them in Paris—the food, the wine, the extraordinary sex, the conversations, and even the comfortable silences—was only a temporary escape. Catching that flight back to the States meant facing the reality of their lives, where their relationship would no doubt be in the public eye by now. The gossip and speculation had already begun before they'd left, and Holly had noticed a couple of sidelong glances and hushed whispers when she was out and about. Each time, she remembered what it felt like to be in Deborah's arms, and this helped her resolve to protect their love.

After they'd been back in L.A. for a couple of days, both of which were spent working in Deborah's building on her internship program, Holly decided to head to the Indigo Lounge. The lounge was a familiar refuge, a place where she could unwind and be herself. This was her mom's second home, and everyone had always made her feel welcome there. As she entered, the dim lighting and soft jazz music welcomed her. She exchanged greetings with a few acquaintances before making her way to the

bathroom. She'd had way too many lattes in an attempt to power through the jet lag that still plagued her and was desperate to pee.

As she closed one of the stall doors, she overheard a conversation that stopped her in her tracks. Ruby, the author that Debs had told her about, was speaking. "I just don't understand it," she said. "Debbie is so much older than Holly, right? What was she even thinking? When it comes to that fake mommy/daughter vibe, it gives me the creeps."

It was then that her stomach really cramped up into knots. She recognized the other voice immediately. It was Nora who responded, "They're both adults. But the age gap is... noticeable. Everyone's talking about it. And considering Deborah's history, I'm worried about Holly. If Holly breaks up with her... Well, it won't go down well."

A surge of anger coursed through Holly's veins. She stepped out of the stall, startling the two women. "Mind your own fucking business," she snapped. "Deborah and I are really good together. We know each other. We've actually got something. Isn't that what matters?"

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Nora looked taken aback but tried to offer a smile. “Holly, we’re just concerned. We don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Nora! I’ll talk to you in a minute. I want to deal with this Ruby bitch first if you don’t mind. What the fuck is your beef, Ruby? We know you’ve been talking to Molly or Melly or whatever the fuck she’s called.”

“What? What are you talking about? I don’t know a Molly.”

“Sure you don’t! Deborah’s assistant. You’ve been filling her in on all the juicy details, haven’t you? You looking for ideas for your shitty novels. You fucking loser.” Holly crossed her arms, her glare unwavering. “Deborah and I love each other. Your concern is noted, but this is our relationship. Not yours.”

Ruby muttered an apology and hurried out of the bathroom. Nora reached out to touch Holly’s arm, but Holly stepped back. “I appreciate your concern, Nora. But please, keep your opinions to yourself.”

“I think you might have gone a step too far there, honey. You nearly ate Ruby alive. Calm down, okay? Let’s talk this through.”

“Let’s not bother.”

With that, Holly turned on her heel and left the bathroom, her heart pounding with frustration and determination. She made her way back to the bar, where she found the chef, Sasha, putting that day’s menus into little plastic covers.

“Hey, Holly! Everything okay?” she asked, noticing her flushed cheeks.

“I just had a run-in with someone who can’t mind her own business. No. Correction. Two someones who can’t mind their own business,” she replied, forcing a smile. “But I’m over it. Let’s not talk about it.”

Sasha nodded, sensing her need to change the subject. They chatted about her latest cocktail invention and the upcoming changes she’d be making to the menus. Holly felt the tension slowly melting away as she immersed herself in the conversation.

Later that week, Holly found Deborah sitting at the kitchen table, reading a magazine. The look of distress on her face was unmistakable. Holly’s heart sank as she approached the older woman.

“What’s wrong?” Holly asked, sitting down beside her.

Deborah didn’t look up; her voice started trembling. “It’s this article in *Happening* magazine. They’re talking about age-gap relationships in the lesbian scene. Listen to this. But don’t lose the plot. Just listen...”

She began to read aloud. “‘The trend of older women dating significantly younger partners has been gaining traction. While some view it as a refreshing challenge to heteronormative standards, others see it as problematic, questioning the intentions behind such relationships. Take, for example, high-profile CEO Deborah Lawson, who is currently dating Holly, the stepdaughter of billionaire real estate developer Nora Hartley.’”

“What? That’s what I’m reduced to? Nora’s stepdaughter? I don’t even see her as a stepmom. I don’t get it,” Holly interrupted.

“Honey, I asked you not to lose the plot about 20 seconds ago.”



“Sorry. Carry on.”

“Their relationship has sparked debate, with some critics suggesting it mirrors the very same problematic dynamics seen in heterosexual age-gap relationships.””

Deborah’s voice broke, and she put the magazine down, tears running down her cheeks and dripping into her mouth. “I knew there’d be gossip, but seeing it like this... It hurts me so badly, Holly. It feels like they’re questioning how I really feel about you. Or like they’re calling me some old pervert or something.”

Holly’s heart ached at the sight of Deborah’s tears. She moved closer, wrapping her arms around her. “Deborah, look at me. These people don’t know us. They want a story.”

Deborah leaned into Holly, sobbing quietly. “I’ve been through so much. My divorce was a nightmare. I don’t know if I can handle this public stress and shame again.”

Holly held her tighter, her voice firm. “We’ll get through this. I love you. That’s all you need to know right now.”

Deborah looked up, her eyes red and puffy. “I love you too, Holly. But what if this never stops? What if they keep writing shit like this?”

“Let’s just deal, okay,” Holly repeated. “We’ll show them that our love is stronger than their gossip.”

Deborah took a deep breath, her tears slowing. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Holly kissed her forehead gently. “You don’t have to worry about that because I’m here. And I’m not going anywhere. Mostly because your apartment is way nicer than

mine, and I don't have a cleaner, alright?"

Deborah cheered up at Holly's joke, and they sat together in silence for a while, drawing strength from each other's presence. Eventually, Holly spoke again.

"How about we go for a walk? Get some fresh air? Mom always says a walk helps clear your mind, and she's right. She's not right about a whole lot of stuff, but she's right about that."

"Esme's always right."

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“Um, she thinks you can get rid of migraines by putting cheese under your pillow. I once had a really bad headache and woke up with cheese in my ear. The woman’s insane.”

Deborah nodded, wiping her tears away. “You’re right. Nobody’s got time for cheesy ears. That’s ridiculous.”

As they walked through the city, Holly held Deborah’s hand tightly. They talked about everything and nothing, and the simple act of conversation helped to ease the tension.

“I’ve been thinking,” Deborah said after a while. “Maybe we should talk to a publicist. Get ahead of the gossip; show them the real us. I know a few good ones through work. I’m sure I could find someone to help us.”

Holly nodded. “I think that’s a great idea. Let’s take control of the narrative.”

Their walk took them to a quiet park, where they found a bench and sat down, enjoying the tranquility. Holly turned to Deborah, her eyes filled with love and determination.

Holly leaned in and kissed her gently. “I love you, Deborah. And nothing will ever change that. I could spend the rest of my life kissing you.”

Deborah’s smile widened. “I love you too, Holly. You make me feel so alive, so wanted.”

A few days later, Deborah suggested they meet Esme and Nora for coffee. Holly hesitated, remembering the confrontation at the Indigo Lounge, but she reluctantly agreed. It was time to clear the air.

They chose a cozy café near Nora and Esme's apartment, a place that felt safe and familiar to all of them. As they entered, Holly spotted Esme and Nora sitting at a corner table. Nora looked nervous, and Esme opened up her arms to her daughter as they approached.

"Thank you for meeting us," Deborah said, looking down at her shoes.

Nora shifted uncomfortably. "Of course. This is great. We need to talk."

Esme nodded cheerily. "We certainly do. And we appreciate you reaching out."

They sat down, nobody daring to be the first to broach the subject. Holly glanced at Deborah, drawing strength from her presence. Finally, she took a deep breath and spoke.

"Nora, I know what you think about our relationship. But all you need to know is that I'm committed to making this work."

"Holly, I never meant to hurt you. I can totally tell that you're happy with Deborah, and that's all I want—for you to be happy. I want what your mom wants, and she wants what you want. Get it?"

Esme placed a hand on Nora's. "We're sorry if our words or actions have caused any pain. And thank you for the souvenirs from France. I bet you girls had a blast. I was so jealous. I've never been to France."

Holly felt a wave of relief wash over her. "Thank you, Mom. You'd love Paris. I want

us all to move forward and support each other.”

Deborah nodded before venturing her thoughts. “I guess we’re all family here in one way or another, and we need to stick together.”

Nora sighed and hunched over a little. “I apologize, Holly. I let my concerns cloud my judgment.”

Holly reached out and took Nora’s hand. “Thank you. That means more than you know. Now, I need to talk to you about my apartment. It’s the neighborhood. There are too many families with dogs. I can’t handle it—the barking, the crying babies, the Teslas. I need your help. Can you get me out of there?” she smirked. Her sarcasm and humor could melt the seriousness out of most situations.

The tension in the air dissipated as Nora recited some of her portfolio from memory.

“You’ve only been in there a couple of weeks! I’m not losing six months’ deposit because you can’t handle a couple of yelping puppies,” cried Esme, shaking her head in disbelief.

They spent the rest of the afternoon talking, sharing stories, and rebuilding the bonds that had been strained. Things almost felt normal for a moment, whatever normal was supposed to be anyway.

The days following the coffee meet-up felt like a fresh start. The warmth of their reconciliation had smoothed over any rough patches, allowing Holly and Deborah to move forward with renewed optimism. As they settled back into what was fast becoming a work-home routine, Holly couldn’t help but feel a subtle shift in their dynamic—a deeper connection.

One sunny afternoon, Holly and Deborah decided to revisit the Indigo Lounge. Holly

was hoping that Deborah could reconnect with the familiar comfort of her favorite spot. The bar had always been a haven for the older woman, a place where the buzz of conversation and the clinking of glasses created a symphony of relaxation.

“Look at us,” Holly said with a grin as they took a couple of seats at the bar. “This should help you get back to a little slice of normalcy, huh?”

As Deborah smiled, her eyes crinkled at the corners. “It feels good to be here. It’s like reclaiming a piece of my world. Our world.”

As they settled in, Sasha waltzed over with a skip in her step. “Hey there, Holly and Deborah. It’s great to see you both. The usual, Debs? Or would you both like to try a new cocktail I’ve been working on?”

“Yes, my usual sounds great,” Deborah responded, looking relieved for the welcome.

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“I’ll try that new cocktail,” Holly offered, her gaze drifting around the room. She took in the atmosphere and marveled at what a wonderful job her mother had done creating the place.

Sasha prepared their drinks with ease, attempting some newly found skills of flipping, mixing, and shaking things.

“Don’t you usually do the cooking? How come you’re so handy with a cocktail shaker?” Holly asked as she watched on in amazement.

“Oh, we’re short on bar staff at the moment. Your mom hasn’t been around as much lately. I’d much rather be in the kitchen. I’m not a fan of chatting to strangers. I don’t know why Esme trusts me to run this place when she’s not around.”

“Don’t be so down on yourself, Sash! You’re doing a wonderful job.”

The lounge, with its plush seating and rich decor, was a comforting refuge from the whirlwind of their lives. As they sipped their cocktails and chatted about their latest adventures, Holly felt as though she were in a cozy enclave. They were simply Holly and Deborah, existing in a world without reluctance around their love.

As they talked about their plans for the weekend, Holly felt Deborah’s hand brush against hers, a gentle reminder of their connection. “You know,” Holly said, “I’ve been thinking about joining a painting group. I need to get back into my work.”

Deborah’s eyes lit up with interest. “That sounds wonderful! Maybe I could join you. It’ll be a fun way for us to spend time together, but I don’t really have any hobbies.

It's all work, work, work with me, and it's been that way for years."

Holly beamed with enthusiasm. "You've got yourself a date, missy. We'll find a group and make it a regular thing. I bet you'll end up being natural."

As the evening wore on, Holly and Deborah found themselves in a lively discussion with a couple of Deborah's friends she hadn't seen in a while. The conversation was light-hearted, filled with laughter, reminding Holly of the fantastic times she'd had with the people she'd met in Australia. She was enjoying the camaraderie, the feeling of being part of a community that embraced them for who they were.

Later that week, Holly and Deborah had a scheduled meeting with a publicist named Amelia. Deborah had mentioned that Amelia had a reputation for handling sensitive situations with grace and expertise, and Holly was eager to see how she could help them navigate the ongoing scrutiny.

The meeting took place in a sleek, modern office with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. Holly and Deborah arrived early, giving them a chance to enjoy the view and collect their thoughts. When Amelia arrived, she greeted them with a warm smile and a confident air.

"Deborah, Holly, it's a pleasure to meet you both," Amelia said, extending her hand.

"Thank you for meeting with us," Deborah replied, shaking Amelia's hand. "We worked together on a project a couple of years ago. I don't know if you remember. We appreciate your time."

Amelia settled into her chair, her demeanor professional yet approachable. "I understand that the recent media attention has been challenging."

Holly took a deep breath. "Our relationship is real, and we want to show that we're



committed to each other. Part of me thinks it's got nothing to do with anyone else, but if they're going to talk, they should be talking about facts."

Amelia nodded thoughtfully. "I think that's a really great approach. We can craft a strategy that shows the world who you truly are."

Deborah's eyes sparkled with hope. "Sounds perfect. God knows why we've suddenly become a source of interest. Here, can I send you these links?" she said, pointing at her phone. "I've collected all the stories I've found in the press recently and kept them in a file."

"Don't worry. I've got all that. We found 147 articles both online and traditionally published."

"What?" yelled Holly, her heart thudding in her chest.

"Don't panic. The Internet is a big place. They're spread all over the place, but we have software here that collates everything. I know what I'm doing."

Amelia leaned forward and made direct eye contact with Holly. "It's important to present your love in a way that resonates with people and counters the negativity."

After the meeting, Deborah and Holly decided to take a stroll through a nearby park.

"I'm thrilled we met with Amelia," Holly said, stopping briefly to stroke Deborah's cheek lovingly. "She seems to really understand us."

Deborah nodded, her smile soft and content. "Yes, she does. I feel much better knowing we have someone in our corner who truly gets it. I'm sure one day soon we will just be old news, but right now it's best to stay ahead of the wave."

“Is she gay?”

“Yes. I’ve also worked with her wife. I can’t remember her name.”

“Debs? Do you only work with lesbians?”

“Ha! Yep! I try to! Or at least women in general. When I started out, women in my business were next to nonexistent, so now I am passionate about changing that.”

They found a quiet spot under a large oak tree and sat down, their fingers entwined. The park was serene, with the distant sound of cars making their way home in the after-work traffic and the gentle rustling of leaves in the branches above. Holly placed her head on Deborah’s shoulder.

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“This feels so perfect,” Holly murmured. “Just us.”

Deborah kissed her forehead softly. “It does. And I’m grateful for every moment we have together.”

Holly looked up at Deborah, her heart swelling with love. “I wouldn’t want to go through this with anyone else. You make everything better, Deborah.”

Deborah’s eyes shone with affection. “And you make my life complete, Holly. I love you more than words can say.”

11

### DEBORAH

Deborah’s office was a shrine to her success: sleek, modern, and meticulously organized. She’d recently upgraded to minimalist décor and had L.A.’s very best interior designers come in and do a makeover. Part of her felt it was a bit self-indulgent and that the money could be better used elsewhere, but she also knew that she had to feel comfortable in the space, and the less clutter there was around her, the easier it was to think. The view of the Los Angeles skyline was breathtaking, but today, Deborah’s focus was on Holly.

She watched her girlfriend from across the room. Holly was discussing her latest project with a colleague. Deborah was so proud of the way she had taken on the challenge of the internship. Attraction aside, Holly’s enthusiasm was infectious. She was bright, driven, and had an innate talent for connecting with people. Deborah

marveled at how effortlessly Holly had integrated herself into the firm. Watching her now, animated and confident, Deborah felt a rush of affection.

She's amazing. Absolutely amazing. How did I get so lucky?

However, the moment was marred by the presence of Mel, Deborah's assistant. Mel's attitude towards Holly had been increasingly hostile. Deborah could see it in the way Mel's eyes narrowed whenever Holly spoke, the subtle but unmistakable disdain in her tone.

"What do you think, Mel?" Holly asked, turning to her with a hopeful smile.

Mel glanced up from her laptop, her expression icy. "It's fine, I guess. But we have more important things to focus on, don't we?"

Deborah felt a surge of anger. She knew Mel was loyal, but this rudeness towards Holly was unacceptable. "Mel, can I see you in my office for a moment?" she said in a calm but firm tone of voice. The kind of tone that nobody fucked with.

Mel looked taken aback but nodded, following Deborah into her office. Deborah closed the door behind them and took a deep breath to steady herself.

"I don't get what's going on with you," Deborah asked, trying to keep her voice level. "I've noticed you being rude to Holly recently. In fact, I've noticed you being a bit off with her ever since she started working here. Is it because you don't like her work—which has nothing to do with you, by the way—or is it because she's my girlfriend?"

Mel crossed her arms defensively. "I'm just doing my best to look out for you, Deborah. It's part of my job. You pay me to make sure things run smoothly around here. And sometimes, I don't think she's very... It's just not professional. It's going to

cause problems.”

Deborah clenched her fists, struggling to keep her composure. “That’s not your call to make, Mel. Holly is a valuable member of this team, and I expect you to treat her with respect. The only problem around here is you. That’s my issue at the moment. I was in a meeting last week, and I’m pretty sure you called me something...derogatory as you walked by. But I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt on that one. Just know that I’m not happy, and I expect to see you change your attitude. Is that understood?”

Mel’s eyes narrowed. “I’m just saying what everyone else is thinking. She’s too young for you, Deborah. And people are talking. She’s immature too. I’m just being honest because I care about you and the reputation you’ve built.”

Deborah’s heart pounded in her chest. “I don’t care what people are saying. I don’t want your opinion. And if I do, I’ll ask for it.”

Mel snorted. “Fine.”

Deborah’s phone rang, interrupting the tense standoff. She glanced at the caller ID and felt her stomach drop. It was her ex-wife, Jenny.

“Mel, we’re done here,” she said, her voice cold. “Get back to work.”

Mel left the office, shooting one last disdainful look over her shoulder.

I think I’m going to have to fire that girl. The goddam insolence!

Deborah took a deep breath and answered the phone.

“Jenny. I’m more than a little surprised that you’re calling me. What can I do for

you?”

“Deborah, we need to talk,” Jenny’s voice was sharp and laced with the anger and bitterness that Deborah knew so well.

Deborah braced herself. “What is it? I have a lot on my plate.”

“You certainly do. I heard about your new relationship, of course. Everyone has. With that girl.” She spat the word like it was venom in her mouth. “Do you have any idea what this is doing to my kids? To my reputation?”

Deborah’s chest tightened, and she struggled to get her words out. “J-Jenny, your kids are in elementary school, right? I’m sure they’re handling this just fine. And they’re not your kids. They’re my nieces, remember? And your reputation is your own business.”

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“You’re being so utterly fucking selfish,” Jenny snapped. “You’re ruining everything I’ve built. You think this...fling is worth that?”

“It’s not a fling,” Deborah said, her voice shaking. “I love her. And let’s make things absolutely clear here. You left me. You fucked off with my sister-in-law. We were married, ‘for better and for worse’ and all that crap, and you ran off with my brother’s wife. I mean, that’s got to be the for worse part. So, I think you caused enough damage to your reputation. You certainly didn’t need my help with that.”

Jenny laughed bitterly. “Love? You’re deluding yourself. This is just coming off as so incestuous. You’re best friend’s kid? She’s using you, Deborah. Everyone can see it but you. Mel said you’ve got her working for you. The girl’s landed on her feet, hasn’t she? As if by magic! Some fucked-up, jobless child who’s been living off her mommy’s money is now living off yours. You’re so naïve!”

Tears pricked at the corners of Deborah’s eyes. “You don’t know anything about us. And it’s so ironic that you’re calling this incestuous! My brother’s fucking wife, Jenny! You took his kids! Just get out of my fucking life!”

“You’ve no idea what a mess you’re getting yourself into, Deborah. And if you don’t end it, I’ll make sure everyone knows just how unstable you are. Think about what that will do to your career. To your life. I don’t like the sound of this Holly kid, but to be honest, I think she’d be better off without you. You’re a fucking mess, and I’m going to tell anyone who’ll listen.”

The threat hung in the air like a guillotine. Deborah felt like she was being suffocated, the air trapped in her lungs. “You wouldn’t dare. All it would do would

bring out the story of you and Hailey. The kids really would be upset, then! And Danny. Have you no thoughts for him? You know he hasn't spoken to me in months! It's just too fucking awkward for both of us."

"Try me," Jenny said, her voice cold. "End it, Deborah. Before it's too late."

The line went dead, and Deborah sat there, staring at the phone in her hand. Her mind was spinning with fear, anger, and confusion. She felt the walls of her office closing in on her, the weight of Jenny's words pressing down on her heart. Jenny was a cold-hearted, cruel bitch.

That fucking Mel... And fucking Jenny! Fuck you!

She needed to get out of the office. She needed space to think. Without a word to anyone, she grabbed her coat and left, heading straight for the Indigo Lounge. The familiar darkness and velvety furnishings felt like a small comfort as she walked in. Esme had done a lot of work remodeling the place, but the Indigo Lounge would always be the Indigo Lounge. She was praying that she'd find her old friend there as her eyes scanned the room.

Esme was sitting at a corner table, and as she spotted Deborah, her expression turned to one of concern. She stood up as Deborah approached, pulling her into a tight hug.

"Debs, what is it? What's going on?" Esme asked, guiding her to one of the chairs.

Deborah collapsed into the seat, her composure crumbling. "It's Jenny. She's threatening to ruin everything if I don't break up with Holly. I'm going to have to tell Holly it's over. I can't do this."

Esme's eyes widened in shock. "God, she's such a bitch. She was always such a bitch, Debs. What did you ever see in her? She treated you so bad. She ruined you.



Anyway, that's not the point. What did she say?"

Deborah recounted the conversation as her voice shook with despair. Esme listened attentively, as she always did, but her expression grew darker with each word.

"She can't do this to you," Esme said fiercely. "She has absolutely no right. After what she did?"

"But what if she does interview with the press or something? You know what she's like. She'll spin it so she's the victim. Look what she did in the divorce. She said I'd abandoned her because of Webflix when all the time she was screwing Hailey. Do you know Danny doesn't reply to my calls? I haven't seen my nieces in over a year?" Deborah's voice broke. "What if she destroys everything? What if I lose it all? I'm spiraling here."

Esme reached across the table, taking Deborah's hands in hers. "Just take a breath. You got this. We can fight her. We'll figure it out. But breaking up with Holly isn't the answer. You and Hols splitting up would have been music to my ears a few weeks ago, Debs. You know that. I wasn't happy about it. But I was wrong. I'm on your side now. I can see it's real. I've never seen Holly this happy, or you."

Deborah's tears streamed down her face. "I'm so scared, Esme. What if she's right? What if Holly is better off without me?"

Esme's grip tightened. "Holly loves you. And you love her. Don't let her take that away from you."

Deborah sobbed, the fear and pain pouring out of her. "I don't know what to do."

Esme pulled her into another hug, holding her tightly. "You're not alone, Debs. I just don't get why she's doing this. What's in it for her?"

“That’s what I’ve been wondering, but I can’t think straight. Maybe it’s because Danny still has access to the kids? Maybe she’s still angry that she didn’t get what she wanted in the divorce settlement? I can’t think. Maybe she just wants to fuck things up for me?”

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Esme’s comforting presence was a lifeline, but Deborah’s mind was a storm of doubt and anxiety. By the time she returned to her apartment, she had made a decision.

She had to break up with Holly. For both their sakes. This was getting out of hand. Her life was spinning out of control. It was a deep reminder of her avoidance of love and relationships. They just caused problems, and the only thing she could truly count on was her work.

The next evening, Holly arrived at Deborah’s apartment, a bottle of wine in hand and a smile on her face. “I’m starving! I don’t know what you’ve cooked, honey, and I don’t care! I’m here for it! I’m kinda hoping it’s half a cow with fried potatoes,” she said, leaning in to kiss Deborah.

Deborah forced a smile, her anxiety moving up a notch at the sight of Holly’s happiness. “I’m afraid not. I made black truffle tagliolini.”

“Oh, Debs! Why sofancy? Sometimes a girl needs meat for energy, you know? Especially considering what I’m planning to do to you later. I don’t think black truffle tagliwhatever is going to cut it!”

“Got it, Holly. Let’s just eat before it gets cold.”

They sat down at the dining room table. Deborah could barely taste the food, her mind consumed by what she had to do. She needed to cut out her emotions and go back to the ice queen soul she had tried to bury within her.

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Finally, as they finished their meal, Deborah took a deep breath. “Holly, we need to talk.”

Holly looked up, her smile fading. “What is it? I noticed you’re kinda miserable tonight. I was so hoping you’d be in the mood for some serious action. I’ve got all this energy I need to burn off... and there’s no better way to do that than with you! I swear to God, Debs... all I could think of when I was at the gym earlier was you. I’m obsessed. Do you remember a couple of nights ago in the shower when you put your?—”

Deborah’s hands trembled as she reached across the table, taking Holly’s in hers. “Please just stop and listen to me. I love you, Holly. More than I’ve ever loved anyone. Really. And I just need to say this. And it’s the worst thing ever. But... I don’t think we can be together anymore.”

Holly coughed nervously as confusion and hurt flashed across her face. “What the fuck are you talking about? Why? Are you having a breakdown?”

Deborah’s voice came out as a whisper. “Jenny threatened to ruin my career if I don’t end this. And... I’m scared. I’m scared of what she could do, and I’m scared of what this could do to you. I’ve been here before and dealing with her is pure hell. My world is crumbling down around me. You’ll be fine, Holly, nobody is going to ruin your life’s work. You will find a million other women who make you happy. You are perfect.”

Holly yanked her hands away. “Stop shitting me. This isn’t happening. She’s old news. You’re divorced. What’s her problem?”

The room felt too big, too empty. The silence was deafening, pressing in on Deborah from all sides. Holly didn't want to hear her words, understandably. She hugged her arms around her middle, trying to hold herself together as she rocked slightly back and forth. The pressure in her head was mounting, a dull ache spreading from her temples down to her neck, making everything feel heavy and sluggish. "I don't know what else to do. I'm so sorry, Holly. I don't want to lose you, but I can't risk everything."

Holly stood up, her chair scraping loudly against the floor. "So you're just giving up? Just like that? Who the hell is this woman? Why are you allowing her to have such an impact on you? Stop closing off and talk to me, please."

Deborah stood, too, reaching for Holly. "Please, try to understand. It's so much more complicated than you think. I'm doing this to protect you. To protect us both. And to protect my brother and his kids."

Holly stepped back, her eyes filled with confusion. "You're not protecting me. You're breaking my heart. And what the fuck this has to do with your brother, who you've never once mentioned, is absolutely beyond me. You've lost the plot, Debs. You're out of your mind. You need to get a fucking hold on yourself."

Deborah's sobs racked her body. The flood of emotions blurred her vision, and Deborah's eyes settled on something insignificant in the room: a small, cracked ceramic vase on the windowsill. The vase had always been there, a forgotten relic from a long-past trip to Italy. She fixated on the delicate, spiderweb-like fracture that ran along its surface, noting how it had remained intact despite its imperfections. "I'm so sorry. I love you so much."

Holly turned away, her voice choked with emotion. "If you loved me, you'd fight for us. But you're letting her win. And I can't be with someone who won't fight for me. I can't be with someone who refuses to explain herself. Someone who spouts total

nonsense about some brother... some random kids... I mean, what the hell?"

Deborah watched, helpless and heartbroken, as Holly walked to the door. "Holly, please."

Holly paused her hand on the doorknob. "Goodbye, Deborah. Please don't contact me again. I don't want to hear your ridiculous justifications. I don't want to ever hear from you again."

The door closed behind her, and Deborah fell to the floor, her sobs echoing through the empty apartment. The love of her life was gone, and all that remained was the devastating silence. Her mind was a whirlwind of regret and sorrow. She replayed the conversation over and over in her head, each moment a knife to her heart. She knew she had to do this, but she didn't know which pain would hurt more.

What have I done? Why didn't I explain things better?

She picked up her phone, wanting to call her back to explain more to her, but she couldn't get the words out if she tried.

Jenny's threats loomed over her, a dark cloud that tainted everything. She had decided to protect her career, to protect Holly, but it felt like the biggest mistake of her life.

Please, let this be a nightmare. Let me wake up tomorrow and find her beside me.

12

HOLLY

As Holly walked up to the apartment building where her mother and Nora lived, she

felt an overwhelming sadness in every cell of her body. She's been through break-ups before, but nothing like this. She hadn't slept or eaten for days. Every time she went to drink so much as a glass of water, she felt sick. The past few days had been nothing but a blur of tears and confusion. Walking out of Deborah's apartment had shattered her world, leaving her feeling totally untethered to reality. She could barely remember how it had all spiraled out of control, but she knew she needed the comfort of her mother now more than ever.

She took a deep breath and pressed the intercom button. "Mom, it's me," she said in a breathless whisper. "Can I come in? I need to see you."

A moment later, the door buzzed, and she pushed it open. The walk up the stairs seemed to take forever, her mind racing with thoughts of Deborah and the life they had begun to build together. She knocked softly on the apartment door, and it opened almost immediately.

Esme stood there, her eyes filled with concern. "Holly, sweetheart, come in," she said, pulling her daughter into a tight embrace. "I've been so worried about you. Where the hell have you been? I've been calling you and calling you, and you never pick up. I've been going out of my mind. And so has Nora. I swear she can't cope with us two. We're too emotional. She's not used to all the outbursts, poor thing."

Holly clung to her mother. "Mom, I don't know what to do. Everything feels so wrong."

"We'll start with tea. And then we'll talk it over. Debs told me everything. I think you're both putting a lot of pressure on yourselves. And I blame myself for that. I shouldn't have been so harsh with you. But I'm here to help you get you through it, alright?"

Her mother led her into the living room, where Nora was sitting on the couch,

looking equally concerned. “Hey, kiddo,” Nora said gently. “Come sit down. Let’s talk. Breakups, huh? Your mom says she’s been trying to get hold of you, so we assumed you’d gone into meltdown mode, right? Tell me about it. I’ve been having a tough time at work. We were supposed to be foreclosing this block in Manhattan. I’ve been up there twice already this month, and I?—”

“Not now, honey,” interrupted Esme, frowning at her wife.

Holly sat between them, feeling like a little girl again. “Yeah, I’ve got work issues as well as love-life drama. I haven’t been in all week, so I’ve probably fucked that up as well. I can’t stay here anymore,” she blurted out. “I want to go back to Australia.”

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Esme and Nora exchanged a worried glance. “Holly, what are you saying? Things can’t be that bad. Have you spoken to Debs at all? Are you sure that’s what you want?” her mother asked.

“We broke up. It’s done. I’m moving on.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but running away won’t solve anything.”

“I can’t be here without her,” Holly said, her voice breaking. “It’s too much. I thought I could handle it, but I can’t. I need to go back to where everything made sense. Coming back here was a mistake.”

Esme sighed deeply and took Holly by the shoulder. “Sweetheart, I think it’s time you knew more about Deborah’s past. Maybe it will help you understand why things happened the way they did. Did she not explain more?”

Holly looked up, surprised. “What do you mean? And no, Deborah never really talked about it. She always said it was too painful. She’s so damn guarded.”

Holly’s mom nodded, her expression growing more serious. “Deborah went through a tough divorce a few years ago. It wasn’t just any divorce; it was a devastating experience and incredibly public. Like the most complicated, emotionally messy divorce ever. Leaving with her a great deal of emotional baggage and a totally guarded heart.”

Her voice grew soft as she continued, “Deborah was married to Jenny, and she always looked after her two nieces, who were almost like children to her. I should



have said something already. I could have warned you this would come up, but I didn't feel it was my place. Jenny was a significant part of Deborah's life, and as a couple they always seemed so solid. We were all pretty jealous of them back in the day. But then everything fell apart. And it was brutal. Jenny left Deborah and ran off with Hailey, who was actually Deborah's brother's wife. She must have spoken to you about her brother, Daniel?"

"Not a single word," replied Holly, her face blank.

Esme sighed deeply, her eyes reflecting the gravity of the situation. "The betrayal was devastating. Daniel was completely blindsided. He and Hailey had been together for years, and their separation was a huge shock. The fallout was brutal for everyone involved. They had two little kids. The media pounced on the story, turning it into a circus. The public couldn't get enough of the scandal, and the court case was streamed live on the Internet, adding an extra layer of humiliation for Deborah. The kids suffered too."

Esme sighed, "Danny and the kids were caught up in it all, big time. He was seriously affected by the split. He hardly ever gets to see the little ones either. The court battles over custody and visitation rights were relentless, and the impact on Danny was... well, he was left a bit of a nervous wreck."

"I'm guessing that Deborah is terrified that all this press about you and her will bring her divorce and her brother back into the fray. Her brother was nearly admitted to a psych unit from it all. It was awful for him. Deb has always held it together for everybody, but Jenny truly broke a piece of her forever."

Holly exhaled. "But why never mention any of this? I mean, she's told me that she was worried about gossip. We even hired a publicist, although I've never heard anything about that since. I don't think she's been of much use. But Debs didn't even tell me about her brother. And we've had all the deep and meaningful chats, you

know? I've really opened up to that woman, and now I'm finding out that she kept all this from me?"

Holly's mother continued. "Deborah tried to keep it together, but she was painted in a very negative light. The public didn't see the full story; they only saw the scandal and the drama. Talk about victim-blaming. Jenny has some great lawyers, let me tell you."

Nora added, "I think she's been through so much, and reliving it would be like reopening old wounds. Maybe she thought she was protecting you, but at least now you know why she's been so guarded. I'm just sorry we were the ones who had to tell you."

Holly felt as though her heart was actually physically aching for Deborah. "Why didn't she trust me enough to tell me any of this? If only she'd just talk to me. Maybe we wouldn't have gotten here."

Esme looked at Holly with a mixture of sympathy and understanding. "Deborah has always been very private. She's afraid of being judged. My bet is that she didn't want to burden you with it all and maybe thought it might complicate your relationship. She doesn't like to admit the emotional baggage that comes with her love."

Nora squeezed Holly's hand gently. "It's not about not trusting you or not loving you. It's about her trying to shield you from the hurt she's still carrying. But you know everything now, so maybe you can get a little perspective? And I'm not saying that in a rude way, honey. I'm trying to help."

Holly felt a lump in her throat, struggling to process the weight of what she had just learned. "Maybe I could have been more supportive and understood her better. I've been a little curt with her at times. I just had no idea."

Nora offered a reassuring smile. “It’s never too late to show support and compassion. It’s about moving forward, right? I’m sure she’s asking herself the same questions.”

Esme clapped her hands together and offered her daughter a sympathetic smile. “Exactly. Wow, Nora! I didn’t have you down as the insightful therapist! That’s my job. Where’s my cutthroat businesswoman extraordinaire gone, huh? But, Hols, listen, my love, Deborah’s past is painful, but it doesn’t change the love you share. Or does it?”

Esme wrapped her arm around Holly’s shoulders as she continued to speak, trying desperately to bring her daughter out of what was clearly becoming a state of depression. “Holly, relationships are complicated. We all have our baggage. You can’t run away from your problems. You need to face them and learn from them.”

Holly nodded and turned to her mother, pushing her tear-soaked face into her shoulder. “I just feel so lost without her.”

“You’re stronger than you think,” Esme said gently. “But you need to take care of yourself first. Maybe going back to Australia isn’t the answer. In fact, it’s really not. I think it would be the wrong move.”

Nora handed Holly a glass of wine. “Here, this might help take the edge off.”

Holly took the glass, sipping it slowly. The wine was a temporary comfort, but it did little to numb the pain. She drank more than she intended, and soon, the room started to spin.

Her mother noticed and gently took the glass from her. “That’s enough for now, sweetheart. Let’s get you to bed.”

Holly agreed, feeling a mix of exhaustion and sadness. Her mother helped her to her

old bedroom, tucking her in like she used to when Holly was a girl. “Try to get some rest now, and we’ll come up with a plan of action in the morning.”

As Holly started to drift off to sleep, she could hear Esme and Nora talking quietly in the living room. “I’m super worried about her, Nora,” Esme said. “She seems so lost and fragile.”

Nora replied, “She’s young, Es. She still has a lot of growing up to do. Maybe this experience will help her mature and understand what it takes to be in a real adult relationship.”

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Esme sighed. “I just want her to be happy. She is older for her years, and I do know Deb will look after her, but it’s so much to process still.”

“Of course it is, but you’re her mother and she needs you more than ever.” Nora replied.

The following day, Holly woke up with a pounding headache and a sense of regret. She remembered the conversation with her mother and Nora and realized that she had acted impulsively during the breakup with Deborah. Over the next few days, Holly decided to give up her internship. It was a tough decision, but she knew she needed time to heal and figure out her next steps. She also knew that bumping into Deborah at the office was the last thing she needed. She had to clear her head and come to terms with what had happened before she could even think about talking to Deborah. So, she asked her mom if she could sub her rent for a while and enrolled in an art group, hoping to find solace and clarity through her painting. It was a small community of artists who met two or three times a week, sharing their work and offering support and encouragement.

Holly immersed herself in her art, pouring all her pain and confusion onto the canvas. The act of creating felt surprisingly therapeutic, helping her process her emotions and gain a new perspective on her life. She spent hours at the art studio, surrounded by the comforting smell of paint and the quiet hum of the creativity of her newfound friends. It was just what she needed.

One day, as she was working on a particularly challenging piece of découpage, Cam, who had recently joined the group, made her way over to Holly, who was sitting in full concentration mode at her easel. “Hey, Holly. Mind if we have a little chat? I

never get a chance to talk to you, and I haven't seen you down at the Indigo in ages. Where have you been?"

Holly looked up, actually feeling pretty grateful for the familiar company. "Sure, Cam. I'd love that. I had no idea you were a budding artist."

"You know what? I've never really found my passion. Unless you count pleasing women."

"Cam! Someone will hear!"

Cam was a few years older than Holly and didn't exactly have a calm and reflective demeanor. Holly had heard that women flocked around Cam, and as she looked at her angular jawline and bright eyes, she could see why, even if her cringy banter was too much for most. As they painted side by side, Holly found herself opening up to Cam about her relationship with Deborah.

"I feel like I didn't give her a chance to explain, or any chance at all," Holly admitted, her brush strokes slow and deliberate. "I was so caught up in my own hurt feelings that I didn't stop to consider what she was going through."

Cam nodded thoughtfully. "It's easy to get lost in our own pain. But it sounds like there's more to the story than you realized. I like Debs. I get on with her fine. I knew about her divorce, but I assumed you did, too. Maybe it's worth talking to her again? Or maybe you should forget all about her and hit the clubs with me. You're too young to settle down. There's a lot of women out there."

"Oh, I had plenty of fun in Australia. I think my one-night-stand days should stay in the past. I'm not interested in going down that road again. You're right, though. I've been so focused on my own feelings that I forgot about hers. I need to be more self-aware, more mature."

Cam smiled encouragingly. “It takes a lot of strength to admit that, Holly. You know what? I remember Debs telling Harper and me about you. She was absolutely gushing. You two were on the right path; it’s worth fighting for.”

Over the next few weeks, Holly continued to hone her skills, her art reflecting the evolution of her emotional journey. She painted scenes of love and loss, of hope and healing. Each brushstroke felt like a step toward self-discovery. She’d always enjoyed painting, and had even started exhibiting a little in Australia, but this group was helping her focus her talent and turn it into something that she felt might be a success. But as happy as she was in the art group, when she was away from her oils she still felt broken. Deborah hadn’t called or texted. Nothing.

Should I make the first move or is it too late?

One evening, after a particularly intense art session, Holly sat down with Cam to discuss her next steps. “I’ve been thinking a lot about Deborah,” she said, her voice steady. “I realize now that I need to fight for our relationship. I’ve had time to reflect, and hopefully she has too, but I need her in my life.”

Cam flashed her new friend a wide smile. “You go, girl! What do you plan to do? I wanna hear everything.”

“I haven’t really thought that far ahead. I think I’ll start by reaching out to her,” Holly said, her determination clear. “I want to apologize for not listening, for not being there for her.”

“Yeah, that’d be a good start. And if it doesn’t work, you or Debs can always fall back on me because I’m going through a bit of a dry spell, and I’d gladly take either of you. Or both. You say the word.”

“You’re relentless and I have no idea how your charm gets so many women into

bed,” Holly rolled her eyes as she laughed it off.

Cam flexed, puffing out her chest before replying, “Honestly, neither do I!”

13

## DEBORAH

Deborah woke to the sound of rain pattering softly against her bedroom window. The gray light of dawn filtered through the thin curtains, casting a somber hue over her room.

God! What a miserable start to the day.

She lay still for a moment, listening to the rain and the steady beat of her heart. She couldn’t summon the strength to get out of bed. Today was the day she would go visit Daniel. It had been too long since they had talked, really talked, about everything that had happened. She needed to see him, to find some clarity and perhaps some solace. She hadn’t told him she’d be showing up, but seeing as he never answered her calls, she couldn’t see what choice she had.

She packed a small suitcase, choosing comfortable clothes for her stay on Daniel’s farm. As she zipped it shut, she felt a mix of apprehension and determination. This visit was long overdue.

The drive to Daniel’s farm took a few hours, giving Deborah plenty of time to be alone with her thoughts. The countryside unfurled around her, lush and green with the vibrancy of summer.

Well, this is nice. The weather out here is so much better than in the city.



The air was fragrant with the scent of fresh rain on earth, a soothing balm to her anxious mind. It was one of her favorite smells. She rolled down the windows to let the cool breeze in, its freshness mingling with the subtle scent of wildflowers and freshly cut grass.

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When she finally turned into the gravel driveway of the farm, she felt a deep sense of relief. The old farmhouse stood proud and welcoming, surrounded by fields of golden wheat swaying gently in the breeze.

God, it's been so long.

The sight brought back memories of childhood visits, filled with laughter and the simple joys of rural life. This used to be their parents' house, and Daniel bought it from them when he got married.

Daniel happened to be outside on the porch as she pulled up. He did a double take as she waved at him through the glass. As he smiled back and started to make his way to her car, she felt giddy with excitement. As she stepped out of the vehicle, he enveloped her in a warm hug. His plaid shirt smelled faintly of hay and sunshine. She thought it was so comforting and grounding.

"It's so good to see you, Deb. I can't believe you're actually here," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"You too, Danny," she replied, feeling a lump form in her throat. "It's been too long. Why do we do these things to each other, huh?"

"Well, you're here now and that's what matters. You need some country life every now and then. It's good for the mind."

"You got that right," Deborah smirked as she readied herself for the stay.

They spent the afternoon catching up, walking around the farm as they talked. Despite how she thought things would go, their reunion didn't feel the least bit awkward. The sun was high in the sky, casting a warmth over Deborah's skin. Daniel showed her the improvements he had made: a new barn painted a crisp red, a chicken coop bustling with life, and a vegetable garden bursting with color. The air was rich with the scent of fresh produce and the earthy aroma of tilled soil. Inside, the rooms he had set up for his kids were a testament to his devotion to them. Each room was lovingly decorated, filled with toys, books, and all the little things that made a house feel like a home. The walls were adorned with drawings and paintings, a gallery of their innocence and creativity. She was proud of what her brother had achieved.

After a dinner of pork and baked potatoes, they sat on the porch, sipping hot coffee. It was never too late for hot coffee, but Deborah knew it was time to broach the complex subject they had both been avoiding so far.

"Danny," she began in a gentle voice, "we need to talk about what happened. About Jenny and Hailey."

Daniel's expression grew serious. "I know. It's been hanging over us like a dark cloud all day, right?"

Deborah took a deep breath, the cool air filling her lungs and giving her the strength to continue what she knew would be a difficult conversation. "I've been carrying this guilt and shame for so long. When Jenny ran off with Hailey, it felt like my whole world collapsed. And seeing you in such turmoil—you and the kids—it totally broke me, Danny."

Daniel grabbed for his sister's hand, his grip firm and reassuring. "None of it was your fault, Debbie. What they did was cruel and selfish, and God only knows how they live with themselves. But we survived, didn't we? We're still here. We're doing just fine. I know it's awkward and weird, I know I'm not good at talking about my

feelings, but I will try.”

Deborah felt tears welling up in her eyes, the salty liquid stinging her cheeks. “I’ve tried so hard to protect myself. But I still feel as if what happened is eating me alive.”

Daniel squeezed her hand. “It was a lot. I think if you hadn’t had such a high-profile job, we could have just got on with life. Weren’t you going to be a hairdresser at one point, Deb? Did you have to go off being the Queen of L.A.?”

She laughed. “I’m not exactly the Queen. Maybe a princess. But yeah, when your wife runs off with your little brother’s wife, it makes for a great story. Especially with kids involved. That hairdresser thing might not have been such a bad idea, come to think of it.”

They sat in silence for a while, the weight of their shared pain hanging in the air like a thick fog. The crickets began their evening symphony.

Finally, Daniel spoke again, his tone lighter. “I’ve met someone new,” he said, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Deborah looked at him in surprise. “Really? Well now you’re going to have to tell me everything. And don’t miss out on any details!”

“Her name’s Emily,” Daniel said, his smile widening. “She’s a vet, and she moved to the area a few months ago. She’s kind, strong, and she’s really made me feel alive again. I forgot how to be happy until I met her.”

Deborah felt a surge of happiness for her brother. “I couldn’t be more excited about this, Danny. You deserve to be happy.”

“And you do too, Deb,” he replied, meeting his sister’s eye. “What about you? Have

you met someone? You can't let that fucked-up mess ruin your world forever, big sis."

Deborah hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Yes, I have. Holly. She's... She's amazing, Danny. She's really brought me out of myself and made me feel things I thought I'd never feel again."

Daniel smiled. "She sounds wonderful. When do I get to meet her?"

Deborah's smile faltered. "There's a problem. Well, there are a few problems. The first is that she's my best friend's daughter, she is twenty-five?—"

"Jesus, Debbie!"

"And Jenny found out about her and has been threatening me. I was so scared of what she might do, I pushed Holly away. I broke up with her. Jenny ruining my life once more. History repeating itself."

Daniel's expression hardened, his jaw tightening. "We'll come to the Esme bit in a minute. The bigger issue here is Jen. She has no right to control your life, Deb. You need to stand up to her. We can't let her bully us both for the rest of our goddam lives. Life is too short."

Deborah felt a surge of determination, a fire igniting in her chest. "You're right. I've been letting my fear control me. But how can I just let it all be? She really fucked me up."

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“I know, but you need to work through it. I got a therapist and did a lot of work. You need to let go, Sis. So, what did Esme have to say about it all? I heard she married her girlfriend. That’s nice. Please pass on my congratulations. Or does she not talk to you anymore, seeing as you seduced her offspring like the dirty old wench you are.”

“Danny!” Deborah chastised. “You’re unbelievable!”

Daniel laughed with his sister, his eyes shiny and resolved. “We’ll face this together.”

“Abso-frickin-lutely. And I’ll help you get better access to your kids. You are right. It’s time to fight back. I do need to let go, and I do need your support too.”

“I’m right there for ya,” he smiled, reaching out to grab their empty cups.

“Thank you. You’ll never know how much this means to me, Daniel.”

“Trust me, I do.”

Deborah felt a weight lift from her shoulders. For the first time in a long time, she felt hopeful. She was not alone in this battle. She had her brother, her love for Holly, and the support of her friends. It didn’t seem possible, but now the sense of impending doom was starting to lighten, and she knew she had to find a way through.

The next day, Daniel introduced her to Emily. She was a warm, down-to-earth woman with a quick smile and a genuine interest in Deborah’s life. Emily’s presence was calming, and Deborah felt an instant connection with her. They spent the day together, talking and laughing, and by the end of it, Deborah felt like she had made a

new friend.

Emily showed Deborah around the clinic where she worked. The clean, antiseptic smell mingled with the distinct scent of animals, creating an atmosphere of care and dedication. They walked through the kennels, where dogs wagged their tails and cats purred contentedly, and Deborah could see why Daniel had fallen for her. Emily was compassionate and strong, just the opposite of Hailey, whom Deborah had always found to be cold and aloof.

That evening, as they sat around the dinner table, Deborah opened up about her relationship with Holly. She described the way Holly made her feel, the joy and the love that had blossomed between them. She also shared her fears and the threats from Jenny, her voice trembling slightly as she spoke.

Emily listened intently throughout. “You deserve to be happy, Deborah. Don’t let anyone take that away from you. You’re a strong, capable woman. You have the power to fight for what you love. Dan talked to me about what happened, and I don’t know how you both got through it. I’ve been asking him to invite you and your friends up for months. They sound like a real hoot.”

“Emily’s right,” Daniel nodded in agreement. “You have amazing connections, Deb. Your friends at the Indigo are incredible women. I’m sure you can lean on them for support. And Holly sounds like she’s worth fighting for. And listen, sis, I’m so sorry for the radio silence. I don’t know what went down. I feel bad.”

Deborah felt a surge of gratitude for their support, her heart swelling with warmth. “Please, Danny,” Deborah replied, feeling a surge of appreciation for the support of Danny and his new girlfriend. “Thanks for reminding me that I know how to be brave.”

The next day, as she prepared to leave, Daniel pulled her close to him, his arms solid

and comforting. “You’ve got this, Deb. Don’t let Jenny or anyone else dim your light.”

Deborah smiled, feeling stronger than she had in years. “Thank you, Danny. I’ll fight for Holly, for us, for the kids. I won’t let her win.”

Driving back to the city, Deborah felt a renewed sense of purpose. She was determined to win Holly back, to show her the depth of her love and commitment. She realized she wanted to plan a grand, romantic gesture, something that would demonstrate her unwavering devotion.

She thought about the places that meant the most to them, the moments they had shared. She envisioned a night filled with romance, a testament to her love and her determination to fight for their future together.

But will Holly even listen to me? Will she even care?

Back in her apartment, she sat down and started writing a letter to Holly. She poured her heart into it, expressing her love, her fears, and her hopes for their future. She told Holly about her visit to the farm, her conversations with Daniel and Emily, and her realization that she needed to fight for their love.

The following morning, she mailed the letter and headed over to the office, where she spent the best part of the morning on the phone with her friends from the Indigo despite a whole host of looming work deadlines.

Over the next few days, Deborah threw herself into her work. Her heart wasn’t in it, though. She hadn’t heard back from Holly, and it was all she could think about. She looked at her cell every five minutes, the feeling of panic and desperation rising in her chest with every passing hour.



Every time her phone vibrated, it sent a jolt of hope through her. She had poured her heart into that letter, and now all she could do was wait for a response, her nerves on edge.

I can't handle this. Call me, Holly! Call me!

As if on cue, the phone began to ring, its familiar chime breaking the silence of the room. Breaking the spiraling thoughts in her mind. Deborah's heart skipped a beat as she quickly crossed the room and grabbed the phone. She glanced at the screen and saw Holly's name displayed. The sight made her catch her breath.

Deborah's fingers were trembling as she answered the call, her voice weak as she said, "Hello?"

"Deborah?" Holly's voice came through, clear and warm but tinged with a definite note of apprehension. "It's me."

Deborah's pulse quickened, and she clutched the phone tighter. "I know it's you, Holly. I'm so glad you called."

Holly's voice held a mixture of hesitation and resolve. "I got your letter. I've read it several times. Listen, I wanted to reach out to you. Do you know? I called several times last week, but I couldn't get through."

"You did? Well... I was at my brother's. And the signal out there isn't great. I can't believe I missed your calls."

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“But you got to see your brother. That’s great. Mom told me about you and Jenny. And the letter filled in all the details, so I wanted to thank you for that.”

Deborah nodded, even though Holly couldn’t see her. “I just wanted to be honest about my feelings and what happened. I’m a fucking idiot. I should have done it a hell of a lot sooner. Will you forgive me?”

Holly’s voice softened. “I appreciate your honesty, Deborah. I’ve had time to reflect, and I’ve come to realize how much I still care about you. I want us to work on this, to talk things through and see if we can find a way forward. I should have supported you better.”

“Really? Do you want to meet up? Really? Wow... that’s great, Holly!” Deborah could feel the tension in her chest beginning to ease.

“Yes,” Holly said firmly. “I think it’s important for us to have a conversation in person. I want to discuss everything and understand each other better. It’s going to be okay.”

Deborah’s eyes filled with tears of relief and hope. “Thank you, Holly. I’ve missed you so much. When would be a good time for you to meet?”

Holly’s voice was thoughtful. “How about this weekend? Maybe Saturday evening?”

Deborah’s heart leaped at the suggestion. “Saturday sounds perfect. Where would you like to meet?”

Deborah could hear a thoughtful pause on Holly's end. "How about the Indigo? There are plenty of quiet, cozy corners in there where we can talk."

Deborah smiled at the thought of them finding each other in the Indigo Lounge again. It had been the backdrop to their relationship. "That sounds wonderful. I'll be there. What time works for you?"

"Let's say eight," Holly suggested. "Does that work for you?"

"It sure does," Deborah replied, her belly doing somersaults.

The silence that followed was filled with a mixture of hope and nervous anticipation. "I'm looking forward to it," Holly said softly. "I think this is the right step for us."

And then Holly hung up the phone.

Deborah took a moment to compose herself, feeling the gentle hum of the room around her—the soft rustling of the curtains in the breeze, the distant chirping of birds outside, and the comforting aroma of coffee that lingered from earlier. She glanced around her living room, the familiar surroundings feeling both comforting and charged with the promise of change.

Her thoughts turned to the upcoming meeting, and she began to prepare mentally. She knew that this conversation was crucial, and she wanted to approach it with clarity and openness. Deborah took out her journal and started to write out everything she needed to say.

The soft buzz of jazz music filled the Indigo Lounge, creating an ambiance of warmth that seemed to envelop every corner of the room. It was a Saturday evening, and the lounge was alive with a sense of anticipation for the night ahead.

Holly stood near the entrance, her heart racing as she glanced around the room. Tonight, it was the stage for a new chapter in her life, and she felt a mixture of excitement and nervousness.

Deborah, dressed in a simple yet elegant dress, walked in just behind Holly. Their eyes met, and the connection between them was instantaneous. It was as if time had stood still, and every shared moment from their past came rushing back in a wave of emotion. They exchanged a glance that spoke volumes, a silent acknowledgment of their journey and the love they still held for each other.

The two of them made their way to the back of the lounge, where their closest friends and family were having a catch-up. As Esme, Nora, Cam, and Harper caught sight of them, their faces lit up. The air was filled with a palpable sense of support.

“Holly, Deborah!” Esme greeted them with open arms. “It’s so wonderful to see you both here.”

Nora added, “We’ve been looking forward to this for days. It’s great to have everyone together.”

Deborah leaned over and whispered in Holly’s ear, “Do you want to go somewhere private? And talk this through?”

“No,” Holly replied. “How about we just be? Let’s just be here. Together.”

“That’s not a problem at all. I wrote notes and everything, but I think your idea is better,” Deborah said, grinning.

The group exchanged hugs and pleasantries before settling into their seats. The atmosphere was lively, filled with the sounds of clinking glasses and laughter. The menu was a feast of culinary delights as always, and the conversation flowed as freely as the drinks.

As the evening progressed, Holly and Deborah found themselves surrounded by their supportive friends. Each person shared heartfelt words, offering their love and encouragement. Cam raised her glass in a toast, her voice filled with genuine warmth. “To Holly and Deborah—Now, I was hoping you two wouldn’t get back together because I’ve been after Debs for years, as she well knows. And as for hot Holly... let’s say I was prepared to give her a whirl.”

Harper chimed in, “What sort of speech is that, Cam? Here’s to new beginnings. We’re all here for you.”

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Deborah looked around at her friends, feeling a deep sense of gratitude. She knew that their support was invaluable.

As the celebration continued, Holly and Deborah found a quieter moment to talk privately. They moved to a more secluded corner of the lounge, where the soft glow of a single lamp created an intimate setting. The noise of the party faded into the background, leaving them in a bubble of tranquility.

Holly reached out and took Deborah's hand; her touch was gentle and reassuring. "I'm happy we're here together, Deborah."

Deborah squeezed Holly's hand in return. "Me too. Jesus, I've missed you so much. I'm so sorry, Holly. I'm so sorry about everything."

Their eyes met, and for a moment, the rest of the world seemed to fall away. Holly took a deep breath, her gaze filled with emotion. "I've been thinking a lot about everything we've been through. I know we have a lot to work through, but I want to rebuild what we had and make it even stronger."

"I want that too," Deborah's voice was tinged with both relief and determination. "I've realized how much you mean to me, and I'm committed to making things right. I should have opened up to you, it would've explained my actions."

Deborah's phone buzzed on the table, breaking the moment. She glanced at the screen and saw a message from Jenny. Her stomach flipped.

She read the message to herself: You have no idea what's coming. Don't

underestimate me.

Deborah's grip on the phone tightened, and she glanced at Holly, her face reflecting a mix of concern and resolve. "Jenny just sent me a message. She's threatening me again."

Holly's expression hardened. "Are you going to answer her?"

Deborah took a deep breath, her fingers flying over the screen as she typed her reply.

BRING. IT. ON.

Holly's eyes met Deborah's, and a sense of solidarity passed between them. They knew that Jenny's threats were serious, but they also knew that they were stronger together.

"Whatever she wants to do to me, it's going to be better than losing you. I'll never let anything get in the way of us again. Jenny can try whatever she wants, but I know the best PR company in the city, and the best legal team," Deborah vented, tapping her hand on the phone.

"Fuck yeah. We got this and I've got you," Holly replied, ready to take on anything.

As the evening drew to a close, Holly and Deborah decided to step outside onto the terrace. The night air was cool and refreshing, a perfect counterpoint to the warmth of the lounge. The balcony overlooked the city, and the twinkling lights created a magical backdrop for their private moment.

They leaned against the railing; their fingers entwined. The silence between them was comfortable, a space where they could reflect on the events of the evening and the journey that lay ahead. Deborah took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp night air, and

looked over at Holly.

Holly stood beside her, her eyes tracing the glittering panorama of the cityscape. The scene felt both familiar and foreign—a surreal mix of memories and new beginnings. Her gaze was steady, filled with a quiet resolve and a touch of vulnerability. The soft rustle of her dress in the breeze seemed to echo the fluttering of her heart as she contemplated their conversation.

“I understand you so much better now. Shall we start all over again?” Holly’s voice was gentle, almost hesitant, yet laced with an underlying strength. The question carried the weight of their shared past and the potential of their future.

Deborah turned to face Holly, her eyes reflecting a deep, genuine warmth. “Let’s,” she replied, her tone imbued with a sense of both finality and hope. There was a moment of stillness between them, where the world seemed to hold its breath, acknowledging the significance of what was about to unfold.

With a soft chuckle, Holly broke the silence, her expression brightening with a mix of playfulness and sincerity. “Hi, I’m Holly. I just moved over here from Australia. I’m Esme’s daughter.”

Deborah’s eyes lit up with recognition and a touch of amusement. “Hi! Wow. You’re all grown up!”

“And you are?” Holly inquired, her tone warm and inviting.

“I’m Deborah. A good friend of your mother’s,” Deborah responded, her smile widening.

Holly’s lips curved into a mischievous grin. “Don’t worry about her. I’ve checked. She’s fine if I want to seduce her friends. Even the ancient ones.” Her eyes sparkled



with playful defiance and a glimmer of the adventurous spirit everyone knew her for.

Deborah's laughter was soft but genuine, carrying a sense of both amusement and admiration. "Oh, that's good news. By the way, I've got a psycho ex who might try to ruin your life if you so much as even lay a finger on me."

Holly's gaze grew serious for a moment. "Shame. Because I was thinking of laying all my fingers on you." Her voice was laced with a mix of longing.

"And I was hoping you would," Deborah replied, bursting into a fit of laughter.

As they stood together on the terrace, the city lights shimmering around them, their connection stronger than ever, a blend of past experiences and future possibilities. As they faced each other, it was clear that they were ready to embrace the journey ahead—together.

## EPILOGUE

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:56 pm*

Five years later

The beautiful estate that Deborah and Holly now called home glowed under the sun that had just started to set over the Pacific. As Deborah looked out across the hills, she smiled and muttered to herself, “What a lucky woman I am.”

Five years before, Deborah never imagined this life could be possible. Jenny’s aggression and threats almost took it all away. But in the end, Jenny didn’t bother doing anything at all, not after she was spotted having an affair with someone else’s wife. Deborah’s brother managed to record everything, and with a quick email to Jenny, filled with scandalous images, she soon shut up.

As Deborah ventured back indoors in search of a pre-dinner cocktail, she made her way through the living room—a contemporary, sleek space filled with family photos and mementos from their travels. Most days, it was a hive of energy, filled with warmth and life, but the kids were nowhere to be seen. She could hear them running around in the playroom upstairs and felt her heart filled at the sound of their laughter.

Holly was busy in the kitchen, cooking up something delicious as always.

Ah, maybe I’ll sit in here and grab ten minutes of peace before dinner.

But Deborah couldn’t resist going in to see Holly. Her wife was standing in the kitchen, her hands deftly mixing a salad. Her hair pulled into a messy bun.

“Hey, babe. I’m debating whether to mix us a cocktail or spend half an hour or so looking into the contract details for Bar 9. You know, as film projects go, this all

seems pretty straightforward.”

Holly walked over to Deborah and pulled her in close, gently placing her lips on Deborah’s mouth. Deborah was taken by surprise as Holly lifted the hem of her skirt and rang a finger over her ass, gently tracing her panty line.

“Not here, honey. The kids might see,” she breathed into Holly’s ear in a soft whisper.

“Later then, babe. I want you.”

“Jesus, Holly. Will it always be like this? You turn me on so much. Everything you say, everything you do to me...”

“Always. But right now, I vote for gin and tonics with fresh lime. The orgasms can wait. Bar 9 can wait. You’ll knock those contracts out in no time, first thing Monday. And I’ll look them over for you before I do the school run. Do you think Jamie will eat this? I put garlic in it.”

“Well, let’s not tell him. And then he’ll gobble it down just like he always does. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

The soft sounds of classical music played in the background, creating a calming atmosphere as Deborah and Holly stood at the kitchen island and sipped their drinks.

“Mommy! Mumma! Look at this!” Jamie, their ten-year-old adopted son, bounded into the kitchen, holding up a graph he’d made himself and colored in a variety of shades. His eyes were wide with excitement, and he could barely get his words out. “I- hey! I timed how long it took for, for the volcano to... to explode! Here’s the results! You won’t believe it!”

Deborah turned, a smile spreading across her face. “Let me take a look, Jamie. I can’t believe you finished that volcano already!”

“Yeah! And it totally erupts! It’s wild. I made it erupt, like, a thousand times already. I really know what I’m doing. I’m like... an expert now. Wanna see?” Jamie’s enthusiasm was infectious.

“Of course,” Deborah said, setting her gin and tonic aside. “But I think we’d better do it outside, right? I don’t think Momma will be too pleased if the dinner she just made for us gets covered in a thick coat of lava. Am I right?”

“I guess you’re right,” replied Jamie with a giggle.

Holly laughed. “Good call, Mommy. I have vivid nightmares about the last time you two decided to do an indoor science experiment. Does anyone else remember the foam party in the bathroom?”

Jamie’s twin sister, Emily, entered the room, her nose buried in a book. “You mean when Jamie decided to see if shampoo, baking soda, and vinegar could clean the toilet, and Momma agreed to let him try it out?” she said dryly, not looking up from her page.

Deborah chuckled. “Exactly. Not my finest moment. You’re right, Em. Come on, let’s go outside and give it a whirl.”

“You do know he’s given it a whirl in the playroom ten times, right?” asked Em.

“Oh, don’t tell me about it now,” giggled Holly. “I can’t deal. We just redecorated in there. I don’t know what we’re going to do with you, Jamie.”

The family moved outside to the backyard, where the garden was in full bloom. Holly

placed the drinks on a nearby table and wrapped an arm around Deborah's waist as they watched Jamie set up his volcano on the lawn. Deborah leaned into Holly, feeling fully supported and loved. She couldn't believe this was their life together. Their family. Their world.

"Ready?" Jamie asked, turning back to look at his family with a wide grin.

"We're ready!" they all shouted in unison.

Jamie poured the mixture into the volcano, and with a bubbling hiss, red foam spewed out, eliciting cheers and laughter from all spectating.

"That's so utterly and totally amazing, Jamie!" Holly said, clapping. "I think you could get a job in special effects. Could we give him a job, Mommy? Do we have any roles open at the moment?"

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“I’m not so sure,” Deborah replied. “I guess we’d have to check the child labor laws in California, but heck... let’s give it a whirl.”

Jamie beamed with pride while Emily looked up from her book to offer her brother an approving nod. “Not bad at all, Jammy Jam. It looks super realistic.”

“Hey, Em,” Deborah said, “what’s that you’re reading? I don’t recognize it. Did Momma buy it?”

Emily’s eyes lit up. “It’s a book about Greek Mythology. Momma ordered it online.”

“I thought we said we were done with the online shopping, Hols?” asked Deborah, a note of concern in her voice.

“Um... You know the nearest bookstore is about twenty miles away, right? Emily and I like to treat ourselves to a little retail therapy from the comfort of our own home. And if it’s books... it’s totally allowed. It doesn’t even count as shopping,” replied Holly in a pleading tone.

“Did you know the Greeks had over 2,000 gods and goddesses?”

Deborah raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? That’s pretty fascinating, kiddo. Maybe you can read me a little of that book at bedtime? What do you say?”

“Absolutely,” Emily said, her face lighting up with excitement.

Holly looked at Deborah, their eyes meeting. “We’ve got some amazing kids, don’t

we?”

Deborah nodded, “We really do. Even if they like blowing stuff up and spending all our cash online.”

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the lawn, the family settled down on the patio for dinner. Jamie and Emily had set the table, but Deborah couldn’t suppress a chuckle when she noticed the mismatched plates and cutlery.

“I like what you kids have done here: blue bowls, red plastic plates, green forks, silver... uh... fish knives, white mugs, and our best crystal flutes. It’s definitely a style,” she laughed.

“So, any exciting plans for tomorrow?” Holly asked, looking around the table.

“I’m going to need you to buy me a book on the Egyptians,” Emily said. “I need to compare them to the Greeks.”

“And I need to make my explosions bigger,” Jamie added. “Mr. Thomas said that this year’s science fair is going to be judged by actual scientists! I need to blow their minds!”

“Right,” Deborah said, looking over to Holly. “Just don’t blow their heads off while you’re at it. Got it?”

After dinner, as the kids helped clear the table, Deborah and Holly took a moment to themselves.

“Can you believe how far we’ve come?” Holly murmured, leaning into Deborah’s embrace.

“It’s been quite a journey,” Deborah replied, her voice soft. “And I wouldn’t trade a single moment of it, would you?”

Holly turned to face her. “Absolutely not. We’ve built something beautiful here, Debs—a family, a home.”

Deborah’s eyes shone. “God, I love you, Holly. You’ll never know how much.”

“I love you too,” Holly whispered, her voice filled with emotion. “I forgot to tell you that my mom and Nora are popping over tomorrow. Mom wants to talk to us about hosting our wedding anniversary at the Indigo. I think she wants to throw us a big party.”

“Oh, no! The in-laws! I need at least 48-hours notice, hon!”

“Haha. Very funny. It’s so weird when you call them that. My mom hates it.”

“I know,” Deborah giggled. “That’s why I do it.”

Their lips met in a tender kiss, a promise of the future they would continue to build together. As they pulled apart, they heard the sound of giggles behind them.

“Eww! Gross! You guys are kissing!” Jamie teased, his voice filled with laughter.

“You’re not used to it, buddy?” Holly said, turning to ruffle his hair. “Well, get used to it, kiddo, because you’re stuck with us forever.”

As the family gathered in the living room later that evening, snuggled up on the couch with bowls of popcorn, Deborah looked at her wife and her children, knowing that with them by her side, she could embrace the future with open arms, ready for whatever came next.