



Fixing Hearts

Author: *K.C. Luck*

Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: One is a grease-streaked heartbreaker. The other is a buttoned-up romantic. Neither of them saw this coming.

Jo Fuller likes her life simple: fixing cars by day, charming women by night, and never getting too close. Her Portland garage is her pride, her independence is sacred, and love? That's just a fantasy people read about.

Evelyn Barkley is one of those people.

A research assistant with a serious career plan and a secret love of steamy romance novels, Evelyn's life runs on logic and order until a Friday night out turns into a slow dance she can't forget.

Can a woman who doesn't believe in forever fall for one who's never taken a risk on love?

Total Pages (Source): 60

One

Bending over the engine of the Chevy Silverado, Joleen “Jo” Fuller was in her element. As she worked loose the last nut holding the alternator in place, she felt the usual sense of accomplishment. Even though the task was something she had done dozens of times in the last few years since she bought the garage and mechanic shop from her friend and mentor, Mr. Diaz, it wasn’t boring. Something about the movement was actually comforting. Jo was confident in her skills and at ease working at something she loved. Although she had never imagined that growing up she would be a full-time mechanic, even owning her own garage, she had always liked working with her hands. Working on cars had come naturally to her when she was looking for a part-time job while attending school nearby at Portland State University. Although her degree was in accounting, she wanted something that would take her mind off her classes, and it seemed working as a helper in the garage was exactly that. And look at me now, she thought as the alternator came loose and she gently pulled it free. Not a ledger in sight. Before she could take it to the workbench, she heard someone moving across the concrete floor of the shop’s first bay where she was working.

“So what time are we getting to Sapphire tonight?” Jo’s employee and best friend Mica’s voice floated from near the workbench. The woman was supposed to be cleaning and organizing tools, but so far seemed much more interested in their plans for the evening. Jo heard the faint clink of metal on metal as her friend halfheartedly moved the wrenches, though it was clear she would rather be talking strategy. Not that Jo intended to brush her off. There was no secret about what she planned to do on Friday nights.

Standing almost six feet tall, Jo rose from under the truck's hood with a streak of grease on her cheek that she absently wiped with the back of her hand. Grinning, she looked at Mica. "I was thinking we would just go from here. It's already close to seven. Is that okay with you?" Carrying the alternator, she walked to the workbench and set it aside before grabbing a nearby rag to clean her hands.

Leaning casually against the workbench and crossing her heavily tattooed arms, a knowing smile played on Mica's lips. "Another Friday? Another night at the bar?" she asked. "Really? Don't you ever get tired of the same old routine?"

Jo shot her a look and raised her eyebrow. "Tired of beautiful women, cheap drinks, and the chance to show off my legendary dance moves?" she asked with a mischievous look in her eyes. "Hell no."

She tossed the rag aside while Mica snorted a laugh. "Legendary, huh?" She shook her head. "More like legendarily awkward. But seriously, don't you ever think about, I don't know, settling down? Finding someone special?"

It was Jo's turn to laugh. "Settle down?" she asked. "Me? Come on, Mica, what are you thinking? You know me better than that." She turned toward the mirror over the workbench and ran a hand through her short-brown, tousled hair. "Now, why in the hell would I tie myself down when there's a whole world of gorgeous women out there waiting to be charmed by yours truly?"

Mica rolled her eyes. "Oh yeah," she said. "Because you're such a catch. Tell me, oh great Casanova, what exactly are you offering these poor unsuspecting women?"

With a dramatic flourish, Jo spread her muscular arms wide. "Where do I start?" she asked. "Charm with devastatingly good looks..." She paused, a slight grin spreading across her face. "And let's not forget my world-famous chocolate chip cookies."

Shaking her head, Mica chuckled. “Oh yes, the infamous Jo Fuller special,” she said. “Woo them with baked goods, then love ‘em and leave ‘em.”

Jo studied her face in the mirror, her grin softening. “Hey now,” she said. “I never promise anything I can’t deliver. They know the score.”

Pushing off the workbench, Mica moved to Jo’s side and placed a hand on her shoulder. “You might surprise yourself,” she said. “There is more to life than one-night stands.”

Jo looked into her own brown eyes. At thirty-five, slight lines showed at the corners. Mostly from laughter, although not everything in her life was perfect. But one thing that is perfect is my current relationship status, she thought. She looked at her friend. “Maybe for some people,” she said. “But this is who I am, Mica. Maybe a serious relationship is what you want, and I get that, but I’m not built for all that serious stuff.” She turned and grabbed the keys to her motorcycle from the hook by the door. “Now, are we going to stand here psychoanalyzing me all night? Or are we going to lock up and go have some fun?”

Her friend tilted her head and studied Jo for a moment. Then she gave it a shake, clearly knowing when to let it go. “All right, all right. Let me grab my jacket.” She ran her eyes up and down Jo’s body and frowned. “Are you really wearing those grease-stained jeans to the bar?”

Jo glanced down at her tight black T-shirt, dirty jeans, and black motorcycle boots, before looking at Mica. “What? You don’t think the whole mechanic chic thing is sexy?” she asked, and her friend shook her head.

“I really hope you’re kidding.”

“Okay,” Jo said, holding up her hands in surrender. “I’ll swing by the house and take

a quick shower. Put on something clean and meet you at the bar in an hour, looking as irresistible as always.”

Standing in the bedroom of her far too expensive yet practical apartment on the Southwest side of Portland, Evelyn Barkley tried to make up her mind. She stood in front of her open closet, phone in her hand, as she surveyed the neatly organized rows of blouses and slacks. Her free hand absently fingered the soft fabric of a navy blazer, her go-to piece for work presentations and conferences. But tonight isn't about work, she thought. Tonight is... well... She wasn't quite sure what tonight was about.

“Evie, come on,” her older sister Jasmine’s voice said through the phone’s speaker. Evelyn couldn’t miss the mix of exasperation and encouragement in her tone. “It’s your thirty-first birthday. You can’t spend it curled up on the couch under a blanket with another one of your romance novels.”

Glancing at the phone, Evelyn felt a flush creep up her neck, grateful her sister couldn’t see her face. “I wasn’t planning on—” she started, but Jasmine cut her off with a laugh.

“Please. I know you better than that,” she said. “Let me guess, you’ve got *Passionate Nights Under the Stars* or something equally steamy hidden under your pillow right now.”

Evelyn’s eyes darted guiltily to her bedside table, where the corner of a colorful paperback peeked out from beneath her tablet. “It’s called *Moonlit Desires*, actually,” she mumbled, then immediately regretted it at Jasmine’s hearty laugh.

“I knew it. All the more reason you need to get out and live a little,” her sister said. “Reading about passion is one thing, but experiencing it? That’s something else entirely.”

Sighing, Evelyn pulled out a sensible off-white button-down blouse and held it up to herself in the mirror. “I appreciate the thought, but a queer bar? Named Sapphire of all things,” she said. “I don’t know. It’s not really my scene.”

There was a pause on the phone, making Evelyn glance at it again to see if her sister was still there. “And how would you know?” Jasmine finally asked. “Have you ever been to one?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Exactly. Look, Evie, I know you’re nervous,” Jasmine said. “But you’ve been questioning things for a while now, right? This is your chance to explore that side of yourself in a safe, accepting environment.”

Evelyn bit her lip. What Jasmine said was true. She had been wondering about her attraction to women. Not all women necessarily, but ones she saw who were a little more masculine. Butch, she thought. That’s the word Jasmine would use. She sighed. Maybe it’s true. Her sister’s words stirred up the doubts and curiosities she had been trying to ignore for months. If she was going to figure it out one way or the other, tonight seemed as good a night as any. Slowly, she put the off-white blouse back and considered her wardrobe again. There was something sexier there, something she had never worn, but she hesitated. She pulled a blue, V-neck silk top from the back. “But what if I make a fool of myself?” she whispered as much to herself as to her sister.

She heard Jasmine sigh. “Oh, Evie,” she said, her tone softer. “Everyone feels like that when they go somewhere new. Someplace different. But I’ll be there with you, and so will Sophie and Brooke. We’ve got your back.”

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Evelyn held the blue top up to herself, studying her reflection. The color brought out her eyes, and the cut was more daring than anything she usually wore. With a shake of her head, she turned away from the mirror. "I don't even know what to wear," she said, a nervous laugh escaping her as she started to put the blouse away.

"Do you still have the blue top I gave you for Christmas last year?" Jasmine asked. "Somewhere in the back of your closet?"

Pausing, Evelyn looked at the blouse in her hand. "I do," she said slowly.

"Then pair that with a pair of black pants you wear when going to fancy conferences." Turning to the closet, Evelyn knew she had a perfect choice that would complete the tasteful but very sexy look.

She bit her lip. "Are you sure?"

"You're going to look amazing," Jasmine assured her. "And who knows? Maybe you'll meet someone special."

Evelyn's stomach fluttered at the thought, but then she took a deep breath. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," she said. "I'm only going to take a look around. Get a feel for things. We might not even stay."

"Sure, sure," Jasmine teased. "Just remember, you're allowed to have fun. It's your birthday. Time to let loose a little. See you soon."

As she disconnected the call, Evelyn's gaze fell on the romance novel by her bed. For

years, those books had been her secret escape, a way to experience the passion and excitement she had always been too cautious to pursue in real life. All her past dates with men, few as they were, had always left her wondering if there wasn't more to romance somehow. But maybe it is time to step out of the pages of all these books, she thought. And into my own love story.

With a deep breath, she held up the blue top. "Happy birthday to me," she murmured, a mix of nerves and excitement bubbling in her chest. Tonight, she decided, she would be brave. Tonight, she would take a chance on something new. And who knows? she thought. Maybe real life can turn out to be even better than fiction.

Pushing through the heavy wooden door into Sapphire, Jo was greeted with the familiar beat of a classic Bee Gees song. She smiled. Nothing like a little disco to get the place warmed up, she thought, taking in the familiar mix of excitement that Friday night generated. The bar was already pretty crowded for eight o'clock, and when she looked, the dance floor was full. Laughter and conversation competed with the DJ's latest mix. Taking a deep breath, Jo felt the tension of the workweek melt away.

"Home, sweet home, yeah?" Mica shouted over the noise as she spotted Jo.

With a grin, Jo's eyes scanned the crowd. "You know it," she shouted back. Walking across the wooden floor toward her friend at the bar, she spotted a group of regulars by the pool tables and raised a hand in greeting. "Hey, Jo, good to see you," a few of them called out over the music. Jo grinned and kept walking. Being a familiar face at Sapphire and brimming with confidence, the crowd parted as she walked through it.

Before she even made it to the counter, she saw her favorite bartender, Jess, smiling at her. "Hi there, handsome stranger," the bartender called, already reaching for a pint glass. "The usual?"

After scanning the taps along the wall behind the bar, many of which were her

favorites, Jo shook her head. “You know what, Jess?” she said. “Let’s try something new. Something mellow and maybe a bit hazy?”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “Well, someone’s feeling a little adventurous. But I’ve got just the thing,” she said. “Came in this morning.” She turned to the taps, pulling a rich, hazy liquid into the frosted glass.

Standing at the counter beside her, Mica rolled her eyes. “I swear you’re the biggest beer snob I know,” she said, and Jo laughed.

“Life’s too short for mediocre beer,” she said, accepting the glass from Jess with a wink. She took a sip, savoring the complex flavor. “Mmm, nice. So what is this?”

“A new IPA from the startup microbrewery downtown,” Jess replied. “Thought you would like it.”

“You know me too well, my friend,” Jo said, nodding appreciatively.

“I’ll try something new too,” Mica said. “But I sure don’t want that stuff.”

Jo chuckled. “I know, I know,” she said. “You hate the taste of beer. Something’s just not right with you.” Mica gave her the finger but then refocused on Jess. While Mica ordered her drink, Jo surveyed the room. Her eyes swept over familiar faces and a few new ones, cataloging potential interest with the practiced ease of a seasoned player. Suddenly, she heard loud laughter from the corner and looked that way. A group of women, clearly in celebration mode, surrounded someone who looked, in Jo’s opinion, a little overwhelmed. Maybe she doesn’t like all the attention, Jo thought, taking another sip of her beer. So then, why is she here? Did they talk her into it?

“A birthday party,” Mica said, following Jo’s gaze. She bumped her shoulder. “Fresh

meat for the Jo Fuller charm offensive?”

Smiling, Jo nodded but held something back from her usual enthusiastic agreement. Maybe it was the slight hesitation she saw in the birthday girl’s posture, or maybe it was Mica’s words earlier about settling down, echoing in her mind for a moment. For a beat, she wondered what it might be like to be part of something like that. A really close-knit group that would take her out for her birthday. Not that she didn’t have friends, especially Mica, but there was something special radiating from the people celebrating in the corner. Finally, she shook her head, banishing any silly thoughts. “No, let them have their fun,” she said. “There are plenty of other fish in the sea.”

Mica stared at her. “Whoa,” she said. “Are you feeling okay?” Jo took a sip of her beer and didn’t answer. Mica leaned closer. “Seriously? Normally, you’d be halfway across the room by now, laying on the charm.”

Savoring the taste of the beer in her mouth before she swallowed, Jo bought time to sort out her unexpected hesitation, and finally she shrugged. “I’m just taking in the scene. You know, enjoying the anticipation.”

“Okay,” Mica said, drawing out the word and clearly unconvinced. “Don’t tell me this has something to do with our conversation earlier.”

Looking at her, Jo narrowed her eyes. “What? No, of course not,” she said a little bit too quickly. She pushed off the bar. “I’m going to go say hi to Tonya and the gang. Are you coming?” Without waiting for an answer, Jo made her way through the crowd, giving high-fives to a few acquaintances and exchanging flirtatious comments with others, falling back into her comfortable routine. But as she laughed and joked, a small part of her couldn’t help but glance at the birthday group. Her eyes landed on the woman who was the center of attention, and for a moment, their eyes met. They held for a beat, and then the blonde woman quickly looked away.

The blonde was attractive, even if she did look out of her element, and Jo contemplated going over to say hello but, for some reason, she held back. Tonight, things felt off, but Jo shook her head, trying to clear any remaining crazy thoughts. This is my territory, my playground, she thought. I am Jo Fuller, charmer extraordinaire, not some sappy romantic looking for... What? Love? Commitment? She laughed. Never going to happen.

Two

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Standing at the tall table in the corner of the bar, Evelyn clenched the glass in her hand. Her friends Sophie and Brooke's laughter, Jasmine's teasing, and the hum of conversation rising and falling swirled around her. The birthday banner was haphazardly strung above their table, fluttering in the bar's cool circulated air, and the lights pulsed to the rhythm of the song on the speakers. Evelyn had trouble taking it all in. Places like Sapphire weren't exactly her scene. She preferred her cozy nights at home with her head buried in a romance novel. But tonight isn't about that, she thought. No, tonight is my birthday. Isn't that supposed to mean something different? Something more?

Suddenly, Jasmine's arm looped around her, and Evelyn forced a tight smile. "Are you having fun?" Jasmine asked. She nudged Evelyn playfully, squeezing her waist. "You look like you just got called on in class or something." Then she paused. "Wait, you always liked being called on in class."

Evelyn exhaled softly and tried to look less like she'd rather be anywhere else. "I'm fine," she answered, though she didn't believe it. She wasn't sure that Jasmine believed it either. Music thumped louder in the background, and Evelyn's fingerstightened even more around her glass of ice water. She wasn't even drinking tonight, trying to keep her head clear. Her nerves didn't need any more fuel.

Jasmine shook her head of short blonde hair. "Come on. This party is about you," she said. "You're not getting away with being a wallflower the whole night. Sophie and Brooke want you out there with us." Evelyn glanced at her two friends, who were already at the edge of the dance floor. Brooke was doing a twirl, her long, dark hair flowing, while holding up her cocktail dramatically. Red-headed Sophie performed an all-too-familiar spinning move, which she clearly picked up from the Internet.

Evelyn couldn't help but laugh. Brooke and Sophie were nothing if not predictable when it came to having fun. She chewed on her bottom lip, not exactly ready to leave her position of quiet observation in the safety of the corner. And then something happened...

As she turned her gaze across the room, she saw a woman. A stranger watched her from near the bar. A very tall, sexy stranger with cropped brown hair and broad shoulders in a black leather jacket that screamed self-confidence, and a smile just soft enough to be dangerous. For a second, their eyes locked. It was unintentional, their connection, but the way the stranger looked at her for that single charged moment made something inside Evelyn tighten, not unlike a jolt of electricity right to her spine. Feeling her cheeks flush, Evelyn quickly looked away.

"Evie," Jasmine said. "Are you coming or what?"

The tension in Evelyn's chest refused to dissipate, and she swallowed, hoping to extinguish it while forcing herself to smile through her sudden confusion. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, okay." Jasmine clapped her hands and then grabbed Evelyn to pull her toward the dance floor. Evelyn let herself be dragged along, heart still beating a little too fast. Sophie and Brooke cheered, clearly delighted to capture the birthday girl at last.

They started swaying along with the beat as more people pressed in around them. "Time to let loose," Sophie said, flinging her arms dramatically as she spun in a circle. Evelyn tried hard to match her friend's enthusiasm with a stiff spin of her own. Yet, even as she swayed awkwardly, trying to mimic her friend's moves to the best of her ability, part of her mind was still stuck at the bar, stuck on that dark-eyed gaze of the tall stranger in the leather jacket. She swallowed again, momentarily losing track of what she was supposed to be doing with her arms.

"Focus. You're the star of the show," Sophie teased. Evelyn did the best she could to

recapture the beat, but then, out of instinct, her eyes flicked back toward the bar counter. Now, the stranger leaned against it, pint glass in hand, this time laughing with someone almost as tall, with a blue baseball cap turned backward on her head, and tattoo sleeves on her arms. Only a friend, Evelyn thought, taking in the old-school flirtatious energy that surrounded the woman. She exuded confidence. And that smile...God, that smile. Where have I ever seen someone with a smile like that?

“Earth to Evelyn,” Brooke called, waving her hands. “Are you feeling that birthday buzz yet?”

Evelyn blinked before giving her friend a strained smile. “Totally,” she lied. But in truth, she wasn’t focused on any buzz of celebration. Even as lights twinkled around the dance floor, even as Sophie shouted something playful and Brooke burst into a rendition of “Happy Birthday,” Evelyn’s focus kept slipping. She wanted to ignore the stranger, but she glanced over again. The woman’s eyes were back on her, cutting through the flashing strobes and the bodies twisting between them. Evelyn’s body betrayed her at that moment. Her heart skipped a beat. Her breath caught in her throat. The stranger looked at her like maybe there was something more to say than words allowed. That thought sent a wave of heat running through her, confusing but undeniable.

Evelyn was normally so careful, so measured, but here in the crowded bar, everything felt unpredictable, unsteady, dangerous. It was terrifying. A burst of laughter from Jasmine caught her ear, but it did nothing to distract her from what was happening right across the room. Clearly noticing the stranger’s approach, Brooke moved closer and whispered loudly. “Uh-oh. Looks like someone’s making their way over here.” Evelyn’s eyes widened. The stranger had pushed off the bar, her movements easy, each step slow and deliberate. The woman wasn’t just coming her way. She’s coming for me, Evelyn thought, and she had no idea what to do about it.

Seeming unable to help herself, Jo watched the stranger on the edge of the dance

floor. The birthday girl, she thought. The woman stood out amidst the sea of moving bodies, and it wasn't because of her dancing ability, that was for sure, but because of her nervous energy. It seemed to radiate from her. And yet, for some strange reason, Jo couldn't help but feel drawn to her. It was a mix of curiosity, but that wasn't all. There felt like something deeper, something she wasn't quite ready to name, and it pulled her forward.

As she made her way across the dance floor, dodging bodies as they moved to the music, Jo's mind briefly flashed back to the earlier conversation with her friend Mica. The idea of settling down and finding someone special seemed so completely foreign hours ago. Yet, here she was, drawn in some strange way to this woman she had never met. She shook her head slightly, pushing the thoughts aside. This is only another night at Sapphire, she thought. Just another potential conquest. Nothing more. Still, the closer she got to the woman, the more intrigued Jo became. She saw the way the woman's eyes darted around, never quite settling on one spot for too long. It was clear that she was out of her comfort zone, trying desperately to blend into the celebratory atmosphere around her and failing. Badly. Jo felt the sudden urge to put her at ease, to see her relax, and maybe even to enjoy her birthday.

When she was close enough, she smiled. "Hi there," she said. "I'm Jo. And I wanted to wish you a happy birthday." Her voice barely raised enough to be heard over the thumping bass, but she could tell the woman had heard her. Her gaze snapped to Jo's face, and there was a nervousness in her eyes.

"Oh, hi. Um, thank you," she stammered, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks. Jo's smile widened, finding the woman's awkwardness endearing.

A new song was starting, and Jo took advantage. "I love this song," she said. "Want to dance with me?" The woman's eyes widened slightly, and Jo could almost see the internal debate playing out on her face. With a quick glance, she noticed that the rest of the birthday party watched the interaction with interest.

The woman cleared her throat. “Clearly, I’m not much of a dancer,” she said, her voice barely audible over the music.

Encouraged, Jo leaned in slightly, her voice taking a conspiratorial tone as she whispered in her ear. “You don’t have to be,” she said. “It’s your birthday. Don’t you want to live a little?” The woman hesitated for a moment longer and then reached for the drink in her friend’s hand. Before anyone could react, she downed it in one swift motion, grimacing slightly, clearly not used to the burn of alcohol. Jo raised an eyebrow and chuckled. She couldn’t help but be impressed and a little amused by the unexpected move.

“Okay,” the woman said, a new determination in her voice. “Let’s dance.” Taking Jo’s hand, she led them further onto the dance floor. Out of the corner of her eye, Jo saw other women’s faces, and there was a mixture of surprise and what might have been approval in their expressions. Jo’s focus quickly returned to her new dance partner, who now stood before her, looking equal parts excited and terrified. The music pulsed around them, and other dancers moved with rhythm.

Taking the lead, Jo started to move her hips, swaying to the beat. Not wanting to overwhelm the woman, she kept her movements simple. “Feel the music,” she encouraged.

Slowly, hesitantly, the woman began to move. Her movements were stiff, and at first, her body was rigid. Clearly, she was nervous. But as the song went on, Jo saw her starting to relax, the tension in her shoulders easing ever so slightly. Slowly, the woman set the tempo between them, and Jo wasn’t quite sure how she felt about it. She was used to being the one in control of the dance floor. The one leading and setting the pace, but something about the woman made her want to hang back. She wanted the birthday girl to find her own rhythm.

As they danced, the world around them seemed to fade. The crowded bar, the pulsing

lights, even the loud music became background noise. Looking at the woman, their eyes met, and Jo found herself lost in how the woman's face lit up when she finally seemed to let go and truly start to enjoy herself. Jo noticed the music beginning to shift. The fast-paced beat gave way to something slower. Uncertainty crossed the woman's face, and for a moment, Jo thought the spell might be broken. Without thinking, Jo stepped closer so her lips almost brushed the woman's ear. She put her hands on her hips. "Do you want to keep dancing with me?" she whispered. She heard the woman catch her breath, and a slight tremor ran through her body. For a heartbeat everything seemed to hang in the balance on Sapphire's crowded floor. Surrounded by strangers and friends alike, Jo found herself holding her breath waiting for the woman's response. Pulling back a little, she looked into her eyes and saw her lips were slightly parted as if she were about to speak, but no words came out. Instead, she gave a small nod.

Slowly, as if handling something fragile, Jo moved her hands onto the woman's waist. She felt the soft silk of her blouse, but also sensed a slight tremor that ran through the woman's body at her touch. "Relax," Jo murmured. "Follow my lead."

As she swayed to the slower beat, Jo found herself aware of every point of contact between them. The heat of the woman's skin beneath her hands, the slight touch of the woman's breath against her neck, in the way their bodies seem to fit perfectly together. Around them, other couples moved to the music, lost in their own worlds, but for Jo, everything narrowed down to this exact moment, this dance, and the stranger in her arms.

Clearly not used to dancing so close, the woman's movements were hesitant at first, but as the song progressed, Jo felt her melting into the rhythm and into Jo's embrace. As they danced, Jo found her mind replaying the events that led up to this strange moment. How the woman had caught her eye from across the room, and the unexpected pull Jo had felt. That nervous energy that radiated from her and the impulsive way the woman had downed her friend's drink clearly for courage. Jo had

seen countless women in Sapphire over the years and had danced with more than she could remember, but something about this one was different. Somehow, she was more vulnerable, and for some reason, tonight of all nights, Jo found that utterly captivating.

As the melody reached its bridge, the smaller woman rested her head on Jo's shoulder and sighed. The gesture was so natural, so unguarded, that Jo sucked in a breath. She nearly froze, unsure how to respond. This reaction isn't part of my routine, she thought. This is not how these nights typically go. But the woman's warmth seeped into Jo, and the scent of her perfume, something light and floral, filled Jo's senses. Her arm tightened slightly around the woman's waist, pulling her closer. Slowly, all of Jo's carefully constructed walls, all her rules about keeping things casual and never getting involved, seemed to crumble.

The colored lights of Sapphire recovered the dance floor in an array of patterns, but Evelyn's world shrunk to a single point of focus. All she could think about was the woman who had introduced herself and asked her to dance. Jo, she thought, finding it so perfect. The woman's strong arms encircled her waist, and their bodies moved together in perfect sync with the beat that thrummed through the air. Her heart racing, Evelyn had trouble catching her breath. With every subtle shift of Jo's hips against hers, she felt a blaze of heat.

"You're a natural," Jo said near her ear. Her voice was low and husky, sending a shiver down Evelyn's spine.

Lifting her head and letting out a nervous laugh, Evelyn's cheeks flushed. "It's the alcohol," she stammered, doing her best to steady her voice despite the trembling in her body.

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Jo responded with a smile, which sent sparks of electricity everywhere the two of them touched. “Maybe,” Jo said, tightening her grip on Evelyn a little more. “But I think you’re selling yourself short.”

Moving together in the sea of other dancers, Evelyn became intensely aware of her own body. She felt the warmth of Jo’s hands resting on her hips, the whisper of her breath against her neck, and how perfectly they seemed to fit together. All of it was intoxicating, and it had nothing to do with the drinks she consumed earlier.

As the music’s tempo increased, Jo suddenly spun Evelyn away, only to gently pull her back in close. The surrisemovement sent Evelyn’s head spinning, and for a moment, she stumbled, bumping against Jo’s hard body.

“Whoa,” Jo said, steadying her with a firm grip. “Easy there. You okay?”

Nodding, Evelyn felt her face burn with embarrassment. “Sorry, I just got dizzy,” she answered. “I can be a little clumsy.”

Jo’s eyes searched Evelyn’s face, dark and intense in the dim light. “I wouldn’t call that clumsy,” she said, but before Evelyn could answer, the music changed to a new song, and Jo’s grip loosened. “You know what? How about we grab another drink?” Jo leaned in a little closer. “I want to get to know you better.”

Her breath catching in her throat, all Evelyn could do was nod. Maybe she should politely decline or make excuses about needing to return to her friends and her sister. Let’s face it, she thought. It’s the sensible thing to do, the kind of decision I usually make. Yet, as she looked into Jo’s handsome face, Evelyn felt something

unfamiliar. She felt brave. “Yes,” she said, unable to hide the breathiness in her voice. “I’d like that.”

In response, Jo’s face lit up with a smile so charming that Evelyn’s heart skipped a beat. “Perfect,” she said, taking Evelyn’s hand. “Let’s do this.” As Jo led her toward the bar, Evelyn couldn’t help but notice her sister and friends watching from the table in the corner. Jasmine’s eyebrows rose in surprise while Sophie and Brooke exchanged glances. Evelyn felt a pang of guilt for abandoning them during her own birthday celebration. But then Jo’s thumb brushed over her palm, and all other thoughts fled from her mind. They reached the bar, and Jo claimed two empty stools. She helped Evelyn onto one before sliding onto the seat beside her.

The bartender, a slender woman with vibrant pink hair, gave them a smile. “What would you like?” she asked, and Jo turned to Evelyn.

“Yes, what would you like?” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Not sure what to do in this sudden, unexpected situation, Evelyn hesitated. She had already drunk more tonight than she planned, and a small voice warned her to be careful. But another part of her, the larger part that still tingled from Jo’s touch on the dance floor, craved something to calm her nerves. “Well,” she said. “How about a Cosmopolitan?” She hoped she sounded more worldly and confident than she felt.

Jo nodded. “Excellent choice,” she said, glancing at the bartender. “And you know what? How about one for me?” The bartender’s eyebrows rose a beat before she moved away to prepare the drinks. While they waited, Jo faced Evelyn again, and their knees brushed. It was casual, yet it felt deliberate to Evelyn, and she had to suppress a gasp.

“So,” Jo said, her voice low and intimate despite the club’s noise. “You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

“It’s Evelyn,” she whispered.

“Evelyn,” Jo repeated, clearly savoring the name. “That’s a beautiful name. And Evelyn, can I ask what you do for a living? Wait, let me guess. It’s something highly intellectual and important.”

Surprised, Evelyn let out a laugh. “How could you know that?” she asked. “I could do anything for a living.”

Jo’s eyes twinkled. “Consider it a lucky guess,” she said with a wink. “Let’s just say you have that slightly overworked but brilliant glimmer in your eyes.”

“Hmm,” Evelyn said. “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not.” She blushed, surprised at her boldness.

“Oh, it definitely is,” Jo said with a chuckle. “I find intelligence incredibly sexy.” Evelyn felt her cheeks heat at Jo’s words. The arrival of their drinks saved her from responding.

As Jo picked up her glass, she raised it in a toast. “To new friends,” she said, her eyes locking with Evelyn’s. “And new experiences.”

Swallowing hard, Evelyn picked up hers and clinked it against Jo’s, her heart racing. “To new friends,” she echoed. “And new experiences.” She took a sip of her drink. The vodka mixed with cranberry burned pleasantly as it went down, adding to the warmth already spreading through her body.

Jo leaned in slightly. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“All right,” Evelyn said. “I’m an environmental conservation research assistant.” She sipped her drink again. “I promise it’s more exciting than it sounds.”

Without missing a beat, Jo nodded. “I believe you,” she said, reaching to tuck a strand of blonde hair behind Evelyn’s ear. The casual gesture, where her fingers brushed against Evelyn’s skin, sent shivers down her spine. Jo’s eyes met hers. “Because you seem very exciting to me.”

The woman’s intent was clear in her gaze, and Evelyn felt a mix of nervousness and anticipation fluttering in her stomach. If she were honest with herself, she was in completely uncharted territory. A deviation from her carefully planned life. Yet, meeting Jo’s gaze she realized that for once, she didn’t want to overthink things. I want to live in the moment, she thought. I want to see where this might lead. With courage she didn’t know she possessed, Evelyn closed the distance between them. Their lips met, and Jo tasted of vodka, cranberry, and infinite possibility. As the world faded around them, Evelyn knew in her heart that whatever happened next, her life would never be the same.

Three

Jo’s heart pounded, and her mind raced to catch up with what had happened. One moment, she and Evelyn were sitting at the bar ordering drinks. The next, Evelyn’s lips were on hers, soft and tentative yet undeniably against hers. For a split second, Jo froze, caught completely off guard by Evelyn’s boldness. Being kissed wasn’t how things usually went. Jo was always the initiator, the one in control. But as the initial shock wore off, a flood of warmth rushed through her body, and instinct took over.

Finding Evelyn’s hips with her hands, Jo leaned closer as she deepened the kiss. She felt Evelyn’s slight gasp against her lips, and it sent a shiver down her spine. As she relished the woman’s mouth, she marveled at how right everything felt. She had kissed countless women in Sapphire over the years, but none had affected her quite like this one. There was a sweetness to Evelyn’s kiss, an earnestness that contrasted sharply with Jo’s usual experiences. It was intoxicating. Just as Jo was losing herself in the sensation, Evelyn suddenly pulled away. Both women sat there, breathless and

wide-eyed, staring at each other in shock and barely concealed desire. Jo's mind raced, trying to process what happened and why it left her feeling so... different.

Evelyn's cheeks were flushed, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she caught her breath. Her eyes held a mix of surprise and something darker. She's totally turned on, Jo thought as their gaze held. She was captivated by the sight.

"I... I'm sorry," Evelyn stammered, her voice barely audible over the music. "I don't know why I did that."

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Jo opened her mouth to respond, to tell Evelyn that she had nothing to apologize for. She wanted to say that the kiss had been amazing, but before she could get the words out, a familiar voice cut through the moment.

“Well now,” Mica said, sidling up to them with a knowing grin. “Looks like you two are having fun.”

Jo glanced at Mica, then back at Evelyn, who looked like she wanted the floor to open and swallow her whole. “I should go find my friends,” Evelyn murmured, starting to get up. “Excuse me.”

Before Jo could stop her, Evelyn disappeared into the crowd, leaving Jo staring after her with a mixture of confusion and longing. Mica nudged her friend’s shoulder. “Earth to Jo,” she said. “You still with us?”

Shaking her head, Jo tried to clear the fog that seemed to have settled over her mind. “Yeah, yeah,” she said. “I’m here.”

Mica raised an eyebrow. “Uh-huh. Sure you are.” She jerked her thumb toward the bottles of liquor lined up along the mirror behind the bar. “Come on, Casanova. I need another drink, and it looks like you could use something a little stronger than your...” She caught sight of the two Cosmopolitans on the counter. “What the hell is that?”

Glancing at the drinks, Jo shrugged. “She wanted one, so I thought I’d try it.”

Staring at Jo for a long moment, Mica’s face was unreadable. “I can’t believe it,” she

said. "You never do that. We need to fix you. Fast." She held up two fingers to get the bartender's attention. "Two tequila shots, please." After a beat, she turned to Jo with a slightly worried, but also mischievous look in her eye. "Make that three."

Jo frowned. "Three?" she asked. "Who's the third one for?"

As if on cue, Evelyn reappeared, looking slightly flustered but determined. "I'm sorry for running off like that," she said, addressing Jo directly. "It was rude of me."

Taking in the woman's open and sweet, yet eager expression, Jo felt her heart skip a beat. "No, it's fine," she said quickly. "I mean, I get it. That kiss, well, it was unexpected."

Mica looked between the two women beginning to smile. "Perfect timing, actually," she said. "I was just ordering us some shots. Tequila."

Evelyn's eyes widened slightly. "Oh, I don't know if I should—"

"Don't be silly," Mica interrupted, pushing a shot glass filled with golden liquid at Evelyn as the bartender set them down. "It's your birthday, right?" Jo watched as Evelyn hesitated, clearly torn between what was likely her usual caution and a desire to let loose. Finally, with a small nod, Evelyn picked up her glass. Mica's smile widened. "Happy Birthday." She lifted her shot glass. "Now, down the hatch." The three women drank in unison, Evelyn coughing as the tequila burned its way down her throat. Jo found herself reaching out instinctively, her hand coming to rest on Evelyn's lower back.

"You okay?" she asked, her voice low and concerned.

Evelyn nodded, her eyes meeting Jo's. "Yes, thank you," she replied. "Just not used to tequila, I suppose." Still, even through the cough, Jo couldn't miss the desire in

Evelyn's eyes, and it sent a bolt of excitement through her.

Setting down her glass with a little more force than was necessary, Mica cleared her throat, interrupting the moment. "Well," she said. "Since Jo's not going to introduce me, I'm Mica. I don't think I've seen you in here before."

Surprised to hear Mica chime in, Jo blinked, suddenly aware of how mesmerizing her attraction to Evelyn was. "Uh, right, sorry," she said. "Mica, this is Evelyn."

A polite smile crossed Evelyn's face. "It's nice to meet you," she said. "And this is my first time here."

"Oh, I see," Mica said in a tone Jo didn't like. "Just some straight girls having a fun birthday party at the gay bar."

"No—" Evelyn started, but Jo interrupted, giving Mica a hard look.

"This bar is open to anyone," she said. "Mica's just joking around, right Mica?"

A grin crossed Mica's face. "Right," she said. "Just joking." She clapped her hands together. "Okay, what's the plan for the rest of the night?"

Caught off guard by the sudden question, Jo hesitated. "I, uh, I'm not sure," she said, her usual confidence nowhere to be found. "What do you think, Evelyn? It's your birthday, after all."

Clearly torn, Evelyn bit her lip, a gesture that Jo already found adorable. "I should probably find my sister and friends," she said, though she made no move to leave. "They'll be wondering where I've gone."

Mica rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on," she said. "The night's still young. Why don't

we all go dance again? Unless...” She leaned in close to Jo as if to whisper. “You’re planning on taking the birthday girl home with you. Maybe?”

Jo felt her cheeks heat up, a sensation she wasn’t used to. Normally, she’d have no problem with the idea. In fact, she’d probably already be leading Evelyn out the door by now. Yet, something about tonight felt different. Somehow, Jo felt that Evelyn wasn’t only another conquest, another notch on her bedpost. She is something else, Jo thought. Something more. Then she shook her head. Of course I will ask Evelyn to go home with me. That was what Jo was all about.

Evelyn’s breath caught in her throat, her eyes widening at Mica’s words. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jo stiffen but couldn’t bring herself to look at the other woman’s face. A mix of excitement and fear coursed through her veins.

“Mica,” Jo warned, her voice low. “Don’t start.”

But Mica’s words had already taken root in Evelyn’s mind, sprouting possibilities she had only dared to imagine in the privacy of her most secret fantasies. Going home with a woman like Jo. Tall, muscular, in a leather jacket and with a sexy smile. The thought sent a thrill of anticipation through her body, followed quickly by a wave of apprehension. Am I ready for this? she wondered. Can I really let myself be so daring?

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Jo put a hand on Evelyn's knee, bringing her back to the moment. "Hey," Jo said softly, her eyes filled with concern. "Don't let Mica get to you. She's just teasing."

Managing a small smile, Evelyn tried to ignore the disappointment she felt at Jo's words. Of course, she is just teasing, she thought. Why would someone like Jo actually want to take me home? "I'm fine," she said, even as her mind raced with conflicting emotions. As she tried to decide what to do next, Evelyn caught sight of a familiar face pushing through the crowd. Her stomach dropped as she recognized her sister, Jasmine, making a beeline toward them with a determined look on her face.

"Evie," Jasmine called, her voice carrying over a lull in the music. "We were beginning to wonder what happened to you."

Evelyn felt Jo's hand slip away from her knee as Jasmine approached, and she immediately missed its comforting warmth. "Really?" she asked. "I'm sorry. I was just having a drink with my new friends."

Jasmine's eyes darted between Evelyn and Jo. "Oh, right," she said. "I remember. She asked you to dance."

Before Jasmine could say anything else, Jo extended her hand with an easy smile. "I'm Jo," she introduced herself. "Nice to meet you."

"Jasmine," she said, shaking Jo's hand. "Evelyn's sister."

The tension in the air was palpable, and Evelyn found herself caught between the two women. She noted the concern in Jasmine's eyes, the protective big sister instinct

kicking into overdrive. “Jasmine,” Evelyn said, trying to keep her voice light. “You remember this was your idea, right? Coming to Sapphire for my birthday?”

Jasmine’s expression softened slightly, but the worry didn’t leave her eyes. “I know, I only wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Jo cleared her throat, drawing both sisters’ attention. “I promise you,” she said. “Evelyn’s in safe hands. We’re having a drink. Nothing to worry about.”

Evelyn felt a rush of warmth at Jo’s words, grateful for her intervention. But Jasmine didn’t look entirely convinced. “Okay,” she said, her tone skeptical, but she looked at Evelyn. “At least come and say goodbye to Sophie and Brooke. They are leaving soon.”

“Okay, I will,” Evelyn said. “I’ll only be another few minutes.”

“Okay,” Jasmine said with one last pointed look at Jo and then made her way back through the crowd.

Evelyn found herself standing at a crossroads. On one side was the familiar, safe path she had always walked. The path of caution and careful consideration. On the other was Jo, representing everything unknown and exhilarating, a chance to step outside her comfort zone and try something she only imagined. Jo’s hand found hers, their fingers intertwining. The move felt as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “You okay?” she asked.

Evelyn took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the moment pressing down on her. She was acutely aware of Jo’s closeness, of the electricity that seemed to crackle between them.

Mica’s words echoed in her mind. “...taking the birthday girl home.” She felt a surge

of desire so strong, it almost overwhelmed her. But there was fear too, a nagging voice in the back of her mind warning her to be careful, to protect her heart. Jo was clearly experienced, very confident, and everything Evelyn wasn't. What if this is just another conquest for her? she wondered. What if I'm setting myself up for heartbreak?

As if sensing her internal struggle, Jo squeezed her hand gently. "Hey," she said, her voice low so only Evelyn could hear. "We don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with. We can keep dancing, or you can go home with your friends. No pressure."

Evelyn's heart swelled at Jo's words. She looked into her warm brown eyes, seeing nothing but sincerity and a hint of vulnerability that surprised her. In that moment, she realized that maybe she was wrong. Maybe Jo was as unsure as she was. The realization gave Evelyn a burst of courage and she squeezed Jo's hand. "I don't want to go home," she said softly. "Not yet, anyway."

Jo's answering smile was radiant, lighting up her handsome face. "Yeah?" she said, a hint of excitement in her voice. "What do you want to do?"

Biting her lip, Evelyn's heart raced as she contemplated her next words. She knew she stood on the edge of something important, something that could change everything. But for once in her life, she didn't want to overthink it. She didn't want to play it safe. "I want..." she started, her voice barely above a whisper. "I want to see where this goes. With you." The words hung in the air between them.

Jo's eyes darkened, her gaze dropping to Evelyn's lips for a moment before meeting her eyes again. "Are you sure?" she asked, her voice husky.

Nodding, Evelyn surprised herself with her certainty. "I'm sure," she said, her voice stronger now. "I want this." She quickly stood. "Let me go tell my friends goodnight." Her heart raced at what she was about to say next. "I'll be right back."

Still feeling a little thrown off balance, Jo watched Evelyn make her way through the crowded bar. The night had taken an unexpected turn, and for once in her life, Jo found herself at a loss. She was excited, but also nervous in a way she had never experienced before. For some reason, Evelyn didn't feel like any other conquest.

"Incredible." Mica's voice cut through Jo's thoughts. "Look who's actually looking nervous. I never thought I'd see the day."

Snorting a laugh, Jo tried to maintain her usual cool demeanor. "I'm not nervous," she said, but the words sounded hollow even to her own ears.

Mica raised an eyebrow. "Nice try. Come on, Jo," she said. "I've known you for years. You're practically vibrating with tension."

With a sigh, Jo ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know. It's different somehow," she said. "She's not like the others."

"No kidding," Mica said, her tone softening. "I've never seen you look at anyone the way you look at her. It's kind of adorable, actually."

Jo felt her cheeks heat up, an unfamiliar sensation. She was used to being the one in control, the one who made others blush and stammer. Yet, as Evelyn approached, looking slightly flushed and more beautiful than ever, Jo took a deep breath, reminding herself of who she was. I am Jo Fuller, mechanic extraordinaire and legendary heartbreaker, she thought. I can handle this.

"Hi," Evelyn said softly, her eyes meeting Jo's with a mixture of shyness and desire that made Jo's heart skip a beat.

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“Hi,” Jo replied. “Everything okay with your sister and your friends?”

Evelyn nodded. “Yeah, they’re heading out,” she said. “I told them not to worry about me.”

The implication hung in the air between them. Jo swallowed hard, feeling a surge of attraction but also an unfamiliar flutter in her stomach that felt a little too much like nerves. “So,” Jo said. “What do you want to do now?”

“I’m not sure,” Evelyn said, biting her lip, a small action that sent a jolt of electricity through Jo’s body. “What did you have in mind?” Hesitating for a moment, Jo was torn between her usual bold approach and a newfound desire to take things slow.

Finally, she made a decision. “How about we go for a ride?” she suggested, her usual confident smile returning. “I’ve got my bike outside. We could get some fresh air, maybe find a quiet spot to talk.”

Evelyn’s eyes lit up at the suggestion. “I’ve never been on a motorcycle before,” she confessed, and Jo’s smile widened.

“Well then, you’re in for a treat,” she said. “Come on, I’ll show you the ropes.” As they made their way out of the bar, Jo caught Mica’s eye. Her friend gave her a thumbs up and mouthed, “Good luck,” causing Jo to give her head a small shake. Mica was simply being Mica, but tonight it felt like a little too much.

The cool night air hit them as they stepped outside, a welcome relief from the stuffy heat of the bar. Jo led Evelyn to her motorcycle, a sleek black machine that gleamed

under the streetlights.

“She’s beautiful,” Evelyn breathed, running a hand along the smooth leather seat.

Feeling a swell of pride, Jo looked at the bike. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ve had her for years, keep her in top shape myself.” As Jo handed Evelyn a spare helmet, their fingers brushed, making Jo feel a pull of attraction low in her body. She took a deep breath, trying to focus on the task at hand. “All right. It might be cold, so wear my jacket.” Accepting the offer, Evelyn slipped on the black leather. It was too big for her, but somehow made the woman look even sexier.

The woman pulled the jacket tighter around her, clearly loving the warmth. “Thank you,” Evelyn said, pulling up the zipper.

The urge to kiss her was strong, but Jo forced herself to relax. “Hold on tight to me, okay?” she said as she slipped a leg over the bike. “And lean when I lean. Think you can handle that?”

With a determined look in her eyes, Evelyn nodded. “I think I can manage.”

Jo felt Evelyn climb on behind her. As Evelyn’s arms wrapped around her waist, Jo had to suppress a shiver. This is going to be an interesting ride, she thought. If that’s all it takes to get me going. As the engine roared to life, Jo felt Evelyn’s grip tighten slightly. With a grin, she eased the bike out of the parking lot and onto the open road.

As they rode through the quiet streets, Jo felt the warmth of Evelyn’s chest pressed against her back and the way Evelyn’s thighs gripped her hips made a heat start to build in her body. I could take her straight to my place, she thought. Like I would normally do. For a reason she couldn’t quite understand, that wasn’t what she was ready to do. Trying not to overthink it, instead Jo took them on a winding route through the city, enjoying the way Evelyn gasped and laughed as they leaned

intocurves. Finally, she pulled into a small, secluded parking lot overlooking the city lights.

After they dismounted and Jo put down the kickstand, she couldn't help but notice the way Evelyn's eyes shone with exhilaration, her cheeks flushed from the ride.

"That was amazing," Evelyn said, her voice filled with awe. "I've never felt anything like it."

Grinning, Jo leaned against her seat, her legs slightly apart to keep the bike steady. "Glad you enjoyed it," she said. "Nothing quite like the freedom of the open road."

For a moment, Evelyn hesitated, her eyes locked on Jo's before she stepped between Jo's legs to get much closer. "Thank you for sharing that with me," she said softly. The air between them seemed to crackle with chemistry. Moving on instinct, Jo dipped her head, and before she could second-guess herself, her lips were on Evelyn's, soft and tentative at first, then harder as Evelyn responded eagerly. Jo's hands found Evelyn's waist, pulling her tighter against her. Evelyn's fingers grasped Jo's shirt, making Jo groan deep in her throat. Evelyn's mouth was everything Jo had imagined, sweet and passionate, tender and fiery all at once.

As they broke apart, both breathless, Jo rested her forehead against Evelyn's. Her mind was a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Desire, excitement, and an unfamiliar sense of vulnerability that both thrilled and terrified her. "Wow," Evelyn whispered, her eyes still closed, and Jo chuckled softly.

"Yeah, wow is right," she said, and as Evelyn's eyes fluttered open, Jo found herself lost in their depths. She wanted nothing more than to take Evelyn home, to explore every inch of her, to lose herself in the passion that simmered between them. But something held her back. A nagging voice in the back of her mind reminded her of all the times she had done this before. Of how many times she had taken a woman home,

enjoyed a night of passion, and then moved on without a second thought. But does Evelyn deserve more than that? she wondered and then grit her teeth. She didn't know what had gotten into her. I need to stop worrying about everything and go with the flow. This is for one night and one night only. As if to prove it to herself, she pulled Evelyn tighter against her and kissed her again.

Four

The night air nipped at Evelyn's skin as she clung to Jo, her heart still racing from their passionate kisses under the starlit sky. Her mind was a whirlwind of emotions. There was exhilaration from the ride, desire from the kisses, and a newfound boldness that both thrilled and terrified her.

"You okay?" Jo's voice, warm and husky, broke through Evelyn's reverie. Blinking, Evelyn realized she had been standing motionless, lost in thought.

A blush crept up her cheeks as she met Jo's gaze. "Yes, I'm fine," she said. "Only processing, I suppose." A gust of wind swept past them, and Evelyn couldn't suppress a shiver.

"You're cold," Jo said with a frown.

Evelyn shook her head, snuggling deeper into Jo's jacket. "I'm fine, really," she said. "It's you I'm worried about. You must be freezing without your jacket."

With a chuckle, Jo flexed her bare, muscular arms in an exaggerated show of bravado. "Please, I'm tough as nails," she said. "A little chill doesn't bother me."

Despite her words and the heat seeing Jo flex sent through her body, Evelyn noticed the goosebumps rising on Jo's exposed skin. Without thinking, she ran her hands up and down Jo's thick arms in an attempt to warm her. The simple touch felt incredibly

intimate, and Evelyn marveled at her own boldness.

Jo's breath hitched, her eyes darkening as they locked onto Evelyn's. "You know," she said slowly. "My place isn't far from here. I've got a fireplace. We could warm up there." The invitation hung in the air, heavy with implication. Evelyn's heart raced, her mind a battlefield of desire and caution. She was in unknown territory, far beyond the safe confines of her usual life.

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Yet the prospect of going home with Jo, of exploring this newfound connection further, was incredibly tempting. “I... I don’t know,” Evelyn hesitated, her practical nature warring with her desires. “It’s getting late, and I have some things to do in the morning...”

Nodding, Jo pulled back. “Of course,” she said. “No pressure. I can take you home if you want.”

Biting her lip, Evelyn hesitated. She thought about going back to her own apartment, alone with her thoughts and the lingering taste of Jo’s kiss on her lips. The idea felt unbearable. In that moment, Evelyn decided. She had spent so much of her life playing it safe, always choosing the practical path. But tonight, she thought. Tonight is my birthday, and I want more. She wanted adventure, passion, and the thrill of the unknown.

“No,” Evelyn said, her voice stronger now. “I’d like to see your place. If that’s okay?”

Jo grinned, making Evelyn’s heart skip a beat. “That’s definitely okay,” she said. “Hop on. Let’s get you warmed up.”

The ride to Jo’s house was shorter than Evelyn expected, but no less exhilarating. She clung to Jo, relishing the solid warmth of her body and the way their forms seemed to fit together perfectly. They pulled up to a modest, well-maintained bungalow on a tree-lined street where Jo parked the motorcycle in the driveway. She helped Evelyn dismount, her strong hands lingering perhaps a moment longer than necessary. “Home sweet home,” Jo said. “It’s not much, but it’s mine.”

As they approached the front door, Evelyn felt a nervous flutter in her stomach. She was at a turning point. Once she crossed the threshold, there might not be a way to go back to the safe, predictable life she had always known.

Jo unlocked the door and stepped inside, turning to look at Evelyn. “Still coming in?”

Evelyn stood on the doorstep, her heart pounding. In her mind, she heard the cautious voice that had guided her for so long, urging her to say goodnight, to call an Uber, to go home, and return to the safety of her routine. Yet, for once, a louder, more insistent voice drowned out her fears. I rode on the back of a motorcycle, she thought. I kissed a handsome stranger under the stars. Maybe it is time to start living. With a deep breath, Evelyn stepped forward into Jo’s home and into a new chapter of her life.

The door closed behind them with a soft click, and suddenly the world seemed to narrow down to only them. Jo’s home was warm and inviting, with a lived-in feel that immediately put Evelyn at ease. A mix of vintage car and motorcycle posters adorned the walls and, surprisingly, framed wildlife photography prints. Comfortable-looking furniture was arranged around a stone fireplace, the focal point of the room.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Jo said, gesturing to the aged but inviting couch. “I’ll get the fire going.”

“Thank you,” Evelyn answered, but while Jo busied herself with the fireplace, she took the opportunity to explore the room. Her eyes were drawn to a bookshelf in the corner filled with an eclectic mix of titles. Everything from motorcycle repair manuals to modern classics. “You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?” Evelyn mused, running her fingers along the books’ spines.

Jo looked from the fireplace, a small flame now flickering to life. “Oh yeah? How so?” she asked, and Evelyn gestured to the bookshelf.

“I didn’t peg you for a Harper Lee fan.”

A smile crossed Jo’s face. “Ah, well, there’s a lot you don’t know about me,” she said, meeting Evelyn’s eyes. “Yet.”

Satisfied with the state of the growing fire, Jo stood. “Go ahead and relax,” she said, watching Evelyn study one of her prints on the wall. “Do you like Riley Keaton’s work?”

Turning, Evelyn nodded. “I do,” she replied, walking closer to the artwork. “Her eye for nature is incredible. And so is your collection.”

Pleased that Evelyn noticed, Jo gestured toward the couch. “Thank you,” she said. “Do you want to sit down? Maybe have a drink?”

Evelyn smiled, a hint of nervousness in her eyes. “That would be nice, thank you.”

“Be right back,” Jo said and made her way to the small kitchen as Evelyn settled on the couch. Finally, she was in familiar territory. Bringing a woman home, offering her a drink, and setting the mood for what would inevitably be a passionate but fleeting encounter all made sense. But something feels different this time, she thought, and her hands hesitated over the bottle of everyday whiskey she usually reached for on nights like these. Instead, she found herself pulling out a bottle of wine she had been saving for a special occasion. “Red wine okay?”

“Perfect,” Evelyn answered, and Jo poured two glasses, her movements deliberate. She was stalling, she realized, taking more time than necessary. Why am I so nervous? she wondered. This is my element, isn’t it?

Yet, as she grabbed the glasses and made her way to the living room, she felt a flutter in her stomach that had nothing to do with physical desire. “Here you go,” she said,

handing one to Evelyn. Their hands touched during the exchange, and Jo felt the chemistry between them crackle at the contact.

When Evelyn sucked in a breath, Jo knew the woman felt it too. “Thank you,” Evelyn said softly, her eyes meeting Jo’s over the rim of her glass as she took a sip. “Mmm, this is very good.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Jo said, setting her wine glass on the end table, unable to miss how her hand shook. This is crazy, she thought. I am not nervous. Suddenly, she wasn’t ready to sit and motioned to the stereo system in the corner. “Would you like some music?”

“I would like that.”

“Any preferences?”

“Not really,” Evelyn said with a shake of her head. “Whatever you like.”

At the stereo, Jo scrolled through her playlists, finally settling on one she usually reserved for quiet nights alone. Mellow indie tracks filled the room with a gentle, relaxing atmosphere. Turning back to Evelyn, Jo saw her studying her wine glass as if lost in thought. Jo’s heart raced as she approached and took a seat next to her. Close, but not too close. Not yet.

“Well,” Jo said, setting a more playful tone. “What do you think of my home?”

Visibly relaxing at the simple question, Evelyn laughed. “It’s wonderful,” she said, her eyes twinkling in the firelight. “I love how you’ve made it your own. Those classic car and motorcycle posters mixed with the wildlife photos? Unexpected, but it works.”

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Jo felt a warmth spread through her chest that had nothing to do with the wine or the fire. “Yeah, well,” she said. “I’ve got layers.”

“I’m beginning to see that,” Evelyn replied, her voice soft and full of something Jo couldn’t quite name. She studied Evelyn’s face in the soft glow of the firelight. There was a flush on her cheeks, a brightness in her eyes that made Jo’s breath catch. Without thinking, she leaned closer and tucked a stray strand of blonde hair behind Evelyn’s ear. Evelyn froze at the touch, her eyes meeting Jo’s with an intensity that suddenly made the room feel too warm. Jo’s hand lingered, touching Evelyn’s cheek gently. This is it, she thought. This is where I make my move, kiss the girl, and start the process of inevitably leading her to the bedroom. Still, as she gazed into Evelyn’s eyes, Jo felt a sudden, overwhelming urge to slow down. She wanted to savor the moment and explore the connection that seemed to be building between them. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

“Evelyn,” Jo whispered. “I think—”

Before she could finish her thought, Evelyn set her wine on the coffee table and closed the distance between them, pressing her lips to Jo’s in a kiss that was both soft and urgent. Jo responded instinctively, her hand coming to rest on Evelyn’s waist, pulling her closer. The kiss deepened, and Jo felt herself getting lost in the sensation. As Evelyn’s fingers tangled in her hair, Jo felt a surge of something that went beyond physical attraction.

Pulling back slightly, Jo rested her forehead against Evelyn’s, both of them breathing heavily. “Damn you’re a good kisser,” she murmured, a smile tugging at her lips.

Evelyn laughed softly, her breath warm against Jo's skin. "Am I really?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "I haven't had much practice."

Jo's mind raced, conflicting emotions warring within her. The part of her that had always kept things casual, that had avoided emotional entanglements, wanted to push forward, to lose herself in the physical pleasure she knew awaited them, and yet another part wanted to explore this connection to see where it might lead. She pulled Evelyn closer, intensifying the kiss, pouring all the conflicting emotions she was feeling into it. Evelyn responded eagerly, her body melting against Jo's.

As the kiss grew hotter, Jo felt the familiar stirrings of hunger, but there was something else too. It was an unexpected tenderness she hadn't ever felt before. Slowly, Jo pulled back, her breath coming in short gasps. Evelyn's blue eyes were dark with desire, her lips swollen from their kisses. It took every ounce of willpower Jo possessed not to give in to the urge to carry her to the bedroom right in that moment. She found herself at a crossroads. The chemistry between them was undeniable, but there was also this new, fragile connection that she was afraid of rushing. She wanted to do this right, to give whatever was growing between them a real chance, but her body seemed to have a mind of its own. Unable to resist, she kissed Evelyn harder.

Flickers of firelight danced across Jo's living room, and soft music played in the background, but all Evelyn could think about was Jo. They sat on the couch, Evelyn's body pressed so close to Jo's she was nearly in her lap, while the woman kissed her. For a moment, everything else in the world fell away. Her hands had somehow found their way into Jo's hair, and Jo's strong, steady hands had slid tighter around her waist, increasing the intensity of their kiss. The insistent press of their bodies sent heat coursing through Evelyn, solidifying the attraction she had felt since seeing Jo at the bar.

Yet, as intense as it was, a creeping sensation started working its way through

Evelyn's chest. Jo's hands moved upward now, exploring further, more intimately. Evelyn's stomach twisted, her heart slamming inside her chest. The closeness was suddenly too much. Without thinking, she stiffened, her breath catching in her throat. Jo immediately responded to the shift.

Slowing her movements, Jo pulled back enough to search her eyes. "Are you okay?" Jo's voice was soft but concerned too.

Evelyn nodded automatically, panic bubbling inside her. She felt Jo's gaze on her, clearly trying to understand, to make sure everything was all right. Jo, she thought. So different from anyone else. Sweet and caring, even though I know she wants me. And I want her... but can I really have sex with her already? "I need to use the bathroom," Evelyn blurted out, barely managing to hide the slight tremor in her voice. "Where is it?"

"In the hall, second door to the right," Jo answered, sounding a little confused.

"Thank you," Evelyn said as she slipped off the couch before Jo had a chance to say another word and nearly ran to the bathroom, her legs unsteady beneath her. Once inside, she shut the door with more force than necessary and pressed her back against it with her pulse thundering in her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to still herself, trying to push back the flood of panic that threatened to demolish her. Breathe, she silently commanded herself. Just breathe. Moving to stand in front of the sink, she gripped its edges like a lifeline. Her reflection in the mirror stared back at her, wide-eyed and flushed. She looked wild and nothing like the Evelyn Barkley, Research Assistant, who had it all together. "What's wrong with me?" she muttered to her reflection.

She really liked Jo. That wasn't the issue. God, that isn't the issue at all, she thought. Her lips tingled from their kiss, the way Jo's soft but confident manner had settled into her bones since they met. She wanted this. The excitement, the connection, Jo's

touch. But then why can't I do it? Why can't I take the next step? Why is my brain flooding with doubts and fears the moment things matter?

Evelyn groaned, trying to collect herself. "You can do this," she whispered firmly, as if saying it would make it true. "Jo's great. She's not going to hurt you. Just go back out there and... just..." Her own voice trailed off in a futile attempt to convince herself that she could do it, that it wasn't too much, too soon. But the truth swirled around her like a storm cloud. No matter how incredible Jo was, no matter how easy things had seemed, Evelyn wasn't ready. I can't go back out there, she thought. Not like this. Evelyn took her phone from her pocket. Anything was better than facing Jo. She was not ready for an intense conversation about all her insecurities.

Without any more hesitation, she opened the Uber app. As she fumbled to press the 'current location' option, her heart pounded with each second as she anxiously waited for the screen to load the availability of nearby cars.

Three minutes away.

A wave of relief hit her. Three minutes. She had an out. If she could simply wait in the bathroom and not face the churning confusion inside her, it would all be okay. She would leave, go home, and text Jo later to apologize and make some excuse. After she figured out what she was feeling. Biting her lip, she tapped her foot nervously against the bathroom's tiled floor. It felt like a betrayal with her brain and her body fighting each other. I like Jo. A lot, she thought. But I just can't do something so unfamiliar.

Checking her phone again, she saw there was one minute left before the Uber would arrive. Her chest squeezed tight. She had to go. It was time to leave, because if she stayed, she didn't know how she could explain.

Five

Sitting on her couch, Jo stared down the hallway toward the closed bathroom door. The soft sounds of indie music filled her living room, and the fireplace crackled gently, but her mind was elsewhere. Her stomach clenched with unfamiliar anxiety as minutes ticked by with Evelyn still in the bathroom. It wasn't how these nights usually went. Usually, by now...Jo shook her head, trying to clear the thought. This isn't usual. Evelyn isn't just another conquest. The realization hit her with surprising force, making her grip the edge of the couch cushion. "What's happening to me?" she whispered to the empty room. The Jo Fuller she knew didn't get nervous. She didn't second-guess herself. And I certainly don't develop feelings beyond physical attraction. Yet here she was, palms sweaty, wondering if she had somehow messed everything up by moving too fast.

Her eyes drifted to the motorcycle posters on her walls, then to the wildlife photography prints beside them. The contrast made her smile despite her nerves. They shouldn't work together, but somehow they did. Exactly like me and Evelyn, she thought. So different, yet there is something there. But am I really ready to explore that?

When Evelyn did not return, Jo stood, pacing the length of her living room. Should I check on her? she wondered. Knock on the door? She shook her head. No. Better to give her space. Still, worry gnawed at her. Did I come on too strong? Did I misread the signals? Their kisses replayed in her mind. The tenderness, the passion, the way Evelyn had melted against her, but there had been something else too. A vulnerability in Evelyn's eyes that made Jo want to protect her, not only desire her. Running a hand through her hair, Jo made a decision. When Evelyn came out, she would tell her they should slow things down. The thought was foreign. Me suggesting we not sleep together? Mica will never believe it. But it felt right.

"I'll just tell her," Jo practiced quietly, rehearsing the words. "Evelyn, I really like you. And because I like you, I don't want to rush this. I want to get to know you better first." The words felt strange on her tongue, but they were true. For the first

time in her life, Jo wanted more than simply physical intimacy. She wanted more. The thought should have terrified her. Instead, it filled her with an unexpected warmth. The bathroom door opening snapped Jo from her thoughts. She turned, the words she had practiced ready on her lips, but they died instantly at the look on Evelyn's face.

"I need to go," Evelyn said, her voice tight. "I've called an Uber."

Jo blinked. "What?"

"It's waiting outside," Evelyn continued, already moving to gather her things. "I'm sorry, I can't do this."

The world seemed to tilt on its axis. Jo's chest tightened as she watched Evelyn slip off her motorcycle jacket and lay it on a chair near the door. "Evelyn, wait," Jo managed. "Did I do something wrong? If I moved too fast—"

"No, it's not you," Evelyn cut her off, not meeting her eyes. "It's me. I'm just not ready for this."

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Jo stood frozen, her mind racing. She should say something. Stop her. Ask for her phone number at least, but the words wouldn't come. For once, the normally smooth-talking mechanic was speechless, watching as something precious slipped through her fingers.

"I'm sorry." Evelyn reached for the door. The apology felt final as the woman slipped outside.

"Evelyn..." Jo started, but the door was already closing. Through her front window, she watched as Evelyn hurried to the waiting Uber. She didn't look back as she got in, and seconds later, the car pulled away. Wrapped in confusion, Jo made her way to the bathroom where Evelyn had hidden. She moved to the counter and looked in the mirror. Searching her face, she couldn't see any noticeable change, but inside, she knew she was. I should have stopped her. I should have said something, anything, to make her stay, she thought, then groaned. I should have at least gotten her number.

But she hadn't. For the first time in her life, Jo Fuller had been too afraid of rejection to act. The irony wasn't lost on her. So many times had she been the one leaving, offering casual goodbyes and vague promises to call. Tonight she knew how it felt to be on the other side. Pushing off the counter, Jo walked back to the fireplace and stared into the flames. A cold emptiness she didn't recognize replaced the warmth that filled her earlier when she decided to take things slow with Evelyn. "What just happened?" she asked the empty room, but the only answer was the soft crackle of embers and the fading notes of music.

The Uber pulled away from the curb, leaving Evelyn standing alone in front of her apartment building. The night air felt heavy around her, or maybe it was simply the

weight of what she had done settling onto her shoulders. Her hands trembled as she fumbled with her keys to open the building's front door, and she still felt the ghost of Jo's touch on her skin. Jo. The thought of her name alone made Evelyn's chest tighten. What have I done? The confused look on Jo's face as Evelyn fled played over and over in her mind like a torturous film reel. Taking a deep breath, Evelyn pushed through the door and turned toward the stairs. Sometimes, when she was tired, going three flights felt daunting, but tonight she hoped the physical exertion would help clear her head. Or at least tire me out enough that I won't lie awake all night thinking about what I just threw away.

As she climbed, each step seemed to bring forth a new memory of the evening. First floor was the way Jo had looked at her across the crowded bar at Sapphire, that confident smile that had made Evelyn's heart skip a beat. Second floor was the exhilarating feeling of being pressed against Jo on the motorcycle, the wind whipping past them as they rode through the city. Third floor was their kisses on the couch, each one more intoxicating than the last. "Stop it," Evelyn muttered to herself, her voice echoing slightly in the empty stairwell. "It's better this way."

But is it? she wondered, finally at her floor. The question nagged at her. Everything had been perfect until she had let her fears take over. Jo had been so gentle, so patient. The way she held Evelyn, the soft looks she gave her, and the careful way she checked to make sure Evelyn was comfortable. Reaching her hallway, Evelyn paused with her hand resting on the wall. She still felt the phantom pressure of Jo's lips against hers, still smelled the lingering scent of leather and something uniquely Jo. The memory of how safe she had felt in the woman's strong arms contrasted sharply with the panic that had overwhelmed her in the bathroom. "She probably thinks I'm some sort of weirdo now," Evelyn whispered, closing her eyes against the wave of embarrassment that washed over her. "I ran away without any real explanation." The image was mortifying.

Shaking her head to hopefully clear her thoughts, Evelyn's hands shook as she

inserted her key into her apartment door. Inside, her usually comforting space, her refuge, felt emptier and less welcoming. Dropping her bag on the couch, she considered having wine to help numb her nerves, but somehow that felt cowardly. A part of her wanted to keep feeling the emotions, even the ones that hurt.

As she fled to her bedroom, her eyes fell on the romance novel on her nightstand, the spine well-worn from countless readings. How many times have I lost myself in stories of passion and courage, of people taking chances on love? she wondered. Yet when faced with the real thing, I ran away. "It's different in real life," she told herself. "Real life is messy and complicated and... and..." And exactly what I always dreamed of. Evelyn groaned, sinking onto the end of her bed. "It was only supposed to be a fun birthday night," she murmured, as if saying the words might make them true. "That's all. I wasn't supposed to meet a tall, sexy butch who carried me away on her motorcycle like some knight in shining armor."

Evelyn stood and walked to her window, looking at the city lights. Somewhere out there, Jo was probably still in her house, probably confused and hurt by Evelyn's sudden departure. Or maybe she isn't hurt at all, she thought. Maybe this is only another Friday night for her, another almost-connection that didn't pan out. The thought shouldn't have hurt as much as it did, but Evelyn's heart ached a little at the idea she was nothing more than a conquest. A car horn honked somewhere in the distance, jolting Evelyn from her thoughts. She realized she had been standing at the window for some time, lost in thoughts of what might have been, instead of facing reality. She didn't have Jo's last name or phone number, and she certainly wouldn't dare step foot in Sapphire again. "Since I won't see her again anyway," she said. "It doesn't really matter." The mantra felt hollow even as she said it.

With a heavy sigh, she turned from the window and began her nightly routine, trying to find comfort in the familiar motions. Yet, as she got ready for bed, everything seemed off. Her perfectly organized bedroom felt too structured after the comfort of Jo's home. As she brushed her teeth, she couldn't meet her own eyes in the mirror for

fear she would see them accusing her of being too scared to live a real life. Even her beloved romance novel seemed to mock her with its promises of passion and happy endings.

As sleep finally claimed her, Evelyn's last conscious thought was of Jo's smile. Not the confident one she wore at the bar, but the soft, genuine one she showed while they had talked by the fireplace. The one that made Evelyn feel like maybe she could be brave enough to do something different. But I wasn't brave, she thought. I ran away instead, maybe leaving behind the possibility of something real. Tomorrow, she would go back to her everyday life. Back to her research, her books, and her carefully planned routine. Yet, as she fell asleep, she knew something had shifted. That no matter how hard she tried, things wouldn't feel quite the same anymore, because now she knew what she was missing.

The beer grew warm in Jo's hand as she sat motionless on her couch, staring at the last dying embers in the fireplace. "Well, that was different," Jo muttered to the empty room, taking another sip of her beer. The taste had gone flat, much like the evening itself. She couldn't remember the last time someone had left her house in such a hurry. Usually, she was the one making excuses, finding reasons to usher women out before things got too complicated. She sighed. Evelyn hadn't even given her the chance.

Jo replayed the evening in her mind. The way Evelyn had melted into their kisses, how perfectly their bodies had fit together, the soft sounds the woman had made. Everything had been going according to plan, following the familiar script that Jo had perfected over years of casual encounters. Except it didn't feel like just another conquest, she thought, frustrated that her mind kept circling back to that thought. It doesn't make sense.

Even before Evelyn fled to the bathroom, Jo had fought the urge to slow things down and savor each moment. "What the hell is wrong with me?" Jo asked the empty room,

running a hand through her hair. Mica's words from earlier that evening echoed in her mind. "Don't you ever think about settling down? Finding someone special?" At the time, Jo had brushed off the suggestion with her usual bravado, but now, sitting alone in her quiet house, the question hit differently.

Setting her beer on the coffee table, Jo leaned into the couch cushions. Her eyes drifted to the motorcycle posters on her walls, the ones that had caught Evelyn's attention earlier. She remembered how Evelyn had noticed the contrast between those and the photographs, how she had seemed genuinely interested in understanding the different facets of Jo's personality. "I've got layers," Jo had told her. Now she wondered if maybe she had been hiding behind those layers for too long.

The truth was that none of her previous encounters had left her feeling so hollow, regretful, and wanting more. Usually after a woman left, Jo felt relieved, ready to move on to the next adventure, but thinking about Evelyn walking out that door made her chest ache in an unfamiliar way. I should have stopped her, Jo thought for the tenth time. She closed her eyes. But what would I have said? Sorry I came on too strong? Sorry I couldn't control myself long enough to show you I wanted more than another one-night stand? It sounded pathetic in her head. And I doubt that, after this mess, Evelyn will return to Sapphire anytime soon.

Jo pictured her curled up in her apartment, probably mortified by what had happened. Will she tell her sister? she wondered. Her friends? Will they laugh about it over brunch, just another story about that butch at the bar who couldn't take a hint? That thought made Jo wince. "I could have been different with her," Jo admitted to the darkness. She could have taken Evelyn on real dates, learned about her research, shared her own passions beyond the superficial charm she usually relied on. She could have shown Evelyn the woman behind the muscles, leather jacket, and sexy smile. The one who baked cookies at midnight when she couldn't sleep, who kept a collection of classic literature with her motorcycle repair manuals. But she hadn't. Instead, she had fallen back on old habits, letting physical attraction override

the deeper connection that had been building between them. And now Evelyn is gone, probably never to return.

Jo's eyes drifted to her phone, sitting silently on the coffee table. She could call Mica, tell her she had been right all along, that maybe it was time to consider something more serious. No way, she thought. Not even Mica would understand how I'm feeling tonight. Plus, she had no desire to admit it all out loud when everything felt raw and vulnerable. Instead, she found herself walking to her kitchen and pulling out flour and sugar from the cupboards. Baking had always been her escape, her way of processing emotions she couldn't quite face. As she measured ingredients with practiced precision, she thought about how Evelyn might have reacted to this side of her. The domestic, nurturing side that so few people got to see. "She probably would have loved my chocolate chip cookies," Jo murmured, then caught herself. "What am I doing? One evening with this woman and I'm already planning baking dates?" But even as she mocked herself, Jo knew something had shifted. The carefully constructed walls she built around her heart had developed a crack, and Evelyn had somehow slipped through before Jo even realized what was happening.

Six

The blaring alarm cut through Evelyn's restless sleep, dragging her into consciousness. She groaned, rolling over to squint at the red numbers flashing on her clock. Seven A.M. For a moment, she lay there, staring at the ceiling, her body heavy with exhaustion. She had barely slept, her mind replaying the night before in an endless loop. Jo's sexy smile, how her hands felt on Evelyn's waist, the warmth of her breath against Evelyn's skin. And then, of course, the way Evelyn had run. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the memories away. It doesn't matter, she thought. It's over.

With a sigh, she forced herself to sit, rubbing her hands over her face. She had a plan. A distraction. Work. It was Saturday, but that didn't matter. She was already behind

on a project at the research facility, and if she was going to spend the day overanalyzing everything anyway, she might as well be productive while doing it. As she swung her legs over the side of the bed, her phone buzzed on the nightstand. She grabbed it without thinking, feeling a ridiculous flicker of hope that it might be Jo. But that would be impossible, she thought. We didn't exchange phone numbers, not that I'd dare text her after what I did. She looked at the screen and saw it was one of her best friends, Brooke. Evelyn sighed and answered, putting the phone on speaker as she padded toward the bathroom.

"Morning, birthday girl," Brooke's voice rang through the room, far too cheerful for this hour. "Pretty sure I saw you do a tequila shot last night at the bar. How's your head? And more importantly, how is your new friend?"

Evelyn groaned, turning on the sink and splashing cold water over her face. "It's too early for this."

"Oh, so something happened," Brooke teased. "Come on, spill. Don't tell me you didn't leave with your tall, dark, handsome stranger. Clearly, she was into you." She laughed. "And you better not tell me you only went for a friendly midnight stroll."

Evelyn pressed a towel to her face. She still felt the ghost of Jo's fingertips brushing against her skin, the way her voice had softened when she asked, "Are you okay?" Evelyn swallowed hard. "Yes," she answered. "I left with her. With Jo."

"Ohhh," Brooke said, drawing out the word. "I'm shocked but so happy for you. I want more details."

With a sigh, Evelyn leaned against the counter. "We went for a ride on her motorcycle," she said. "To her house."

There was a long pause on the phone, and Evelyn checked the screen to see if Brooke

was still there. “Oh my God,” Brooke finally said. “Now that is some birthday present. Is this new friend, Jo, a good kisser?”

Closing her eyes, Evelyn thought of Jo’s lips, so full and warm, on hers and felt a twist of regret in her stomach. “I left her place before anything happened,” she blurted. “In an Uber. Pretty much without saying goodbye.”

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There was another pause, and Evelyn braced herself for what her best friend might say next. “Wait, you left?” Brooke sounded genuinely shocked. “Like, ran?” Evelyn winced. She hated how easily her best friend could read her, even over the phone. “I didn’t run exactly,” she muttered, stepping into her bedroom and pulling open her closet. “I simply wasn’t ready.”

“But you really like her, don’t you?” she asked in a softer voice.

Evelyn froze. Do I? she thought. Images of Jo flashed in her mind. Her smile. The way she looked at Evelyn like she was something worth paying attention to. The way she made Evelyn feel wanted. Yes. I liked her. More than I am ready to admit. “It doesn’t matter,” Evelyn said finally, pulling a pair of navy blue slacks off the hanger and laying them on the bed. “She probably thinks I’m ridiculous.”

“Or maybe she doesn’t,” Brooke countered. “You could text her. Call her and explain.”

Evelyn let out a bitter laugh. “I can’t, actually,” she said, selecting a simple white blouse from the closet. “I don’t have her number. I don’t even know her last name.”

Brooke was silent for a beat. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” Evelyn pulled on her pants more forcefully than necessary. “I have no way to contact her. And she has no way to contact me.”

“So unless you’re willing to go to Sapphire again, you’re never going to see her?”

Evelyn swallowed against the lump forming in her throat. “Probably not,” she answered, slipping on her shirt. “And that’s probably for the best.” The words felt heavier than she expected. She had known last night that leaving meant closing the door on whatever was happening between them but saying it out loud made it real. It made it feel final.

Brooke sighed. “Evie...”

“It’s fine,” Evelyn interrupted, smoothing her blouse and reaching for her Apple watch on the dresser. “It was just one crazy night. It’s not the end of the world.” Even as she said it, something inside her twisted.

“Yeah,” Brooke said slowly. “But don’t lie to yourself, okay? If you wanted to find her again, you probably could.”

Ignoring that, Evelyn slipped on her flats and headed toward the kitchen to make coffee. “I have to go to work.”

“Wait,” Brooke said. “It’s Saturday. Why are you going to work?”

Evelyn exhaled sharply. “I’m behind on a project.”

Brooke let out a dramatic groan. “You are such a workaholic,” she said. “This is why you don’t date.”

Shaking her head, Evelyn started the water kettle. “Goodbye, Brooke.”

“Goodbye, heartbreaker,” Brooke said in a teasing tone before hanging up.

Evelyn let out a long breath as she put coffee in the French Press. I am fine. I made the right choice, she thought. I’m not living in some romantic novel. She would never

see Jo again, and she simply had to accept it.

The faint sound of classic rock played from the radio in the corner while Jo stood at her workbench, staring at the disassembled carburetor in front of her. Normally, the meticulous process of rebuilding an engine part would be enough to clear her mind. Today, it wasn't working because her mind was still on Evelyn. She puffed out a breath and shook her head. Get it together, she thought. Let this one go. It wasn't like her to dwell on a woman after only one night, especially one that ended with her getting left in her own damn house. But something about the way Evelyn looked at her before she bolted, the hesitation in her voice when she said she had to go, stuck with her. Jo wasn't mad. Confused? she thought. Oh, yeah. Frustrated? A little. But mostly, she wished she had handled it differently. Maybe if I said the right thing, Evelyn wouldn't have felt the need to run.

The shop door swung open, and Mica strolled in, balancing two coffee cups in her hands. "Whoa, Jo, you look like hell."

Jo glared. "Good morning to you too."

Mica grinned, handing her one of the coffees. "I mean, I assumed you'd be all smug and well-rested after last night," she said. "But you look like... honestly, I don't know what you look like. I've never seen you like this."

Jo took a sip of coffee, letting the warmth settle into her chest. "Yeah, well, things didn't exactly go the way I thought they would," she said. "Not at all."

Raising an eyebrow, Mica hopped up onto the counter beside Jo. "Wait," she said as her eyes widened. "Did she reject you?"

Jo groaned. "Can you not say it like that?" she asked, and Mica gasped but then grinned wider.

“Oh my God. She rejected you.”

“She didn’t reject me,” Jo said with a scowl. “She just left.”

“Wait.” Mica blinked. “Like, left left?”

Rubbing the back of her neck, Jo nodded. “Called an Uber,” she said. “Didn’t even let me take her home.”

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Shaking her head, Mica let out a low whistle. “Damn,” she said. “That’s rough.”

Staring into her coffee cup, Jo sighed. “Yeah.”

Tilting her head, Mica studied her for a long moment. “And you’re actually really upset about it.”

Jo hesitated, then let her shoulder slump. “Yeah,” she said. “I am.”

“Well, hell,” Mica said. “I didn’t think I’d live to see the day.”

Picking up a rag and rubbing it over her hands, Jo gave her a glare. “Can you not?” she said, and Mica held up her hands in mock surrender.

“I’m only saying,” she said. “I’ve never seen you like this over a girl before.”

Staring at the half-assembled carburetor on the workbench, Jo exhaled, but before she could answer, the shop’s front door opening caught her attention. “Ah, there’s my favorite troublemaker,” a familiar voice called out. Jo turned as a man with black hair mixed with gray walked in, his old fleece jacket zipped up against the morning chill.

Grateful for the distraction, Jo smiled. “Morning, Mr. Diaz.”

Mica hopped off the counter. “Hey, Mr. D,” she said. “Out for your usual morning walk around the ol’ neighborhood?”

“Of course,” Mr. Diaz said. “Figured I’d stop by and check in on my old shop. Make

sure you haven't run it into the ground yet."

Used to the playful banter with the man who taught Jo everything she knew about cars, she laughed. "As you can see," she said. "It's still standing."

"I never had any doubt," Mr. Diaz teased, his sharp eyes scanning the garage before settling back on Jo. "Though you look like you could use a few extra hours of sleep. Late night?"

Mica chuckled. "Oh, you have no idea."

Jo groaned, shooting her a warning look. "Mica—"

"She got left in the dust, Mr. D," Mica announced, clearly ignoring Jo completely. "Woman of the hour called an Uber and bailed."

Mr. Diaz raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. "Well, I think that's a first," he said, and Jo sighed, rubbing a hand over her face.

"Great," she said. "Glad my humiliation is so entertaining for everyone."

"Ah, Jo, it was bound to happen eventually," he said with a chuckle. He patted Jo's shoulder before making his way over to the workbench, inspecting the disassembled carburetor. "So, what's the story?"

Jo hesitated, but Mr. Diaz had been a mentor to her for years. He was one of the few people who actually knew her beyond the surface-level charm. "Met someone last night," she admitted with a sigh. "A woman named Evelyn." Mr. Diaz nodded, listening. "She's different. Smart. Beautiful. A little awkward, but in a cute way." Her voice trailed off, not sure she wanted to continue.

“So far, I don’t see the problem,” Mr. Diaz said, picking up a piece of the carburetor to look at it more closely. “What’s the rest of the story?”

“We hit it off,” Jo closed her eyes and thought back on the night. “Went for a ride on my bike and eventually back to my place. I thought everything was going great, and then, I don’t know. She just left before anything could really happen.”

Mr. Diaz hummed. “And how did you feel about that?” he asked, setting down the engine part.

Jo frowned. “I dunno. Confused? I mean, I’ve had women say no before, but this felt different.”

Mica snorted. “Translation. Jo actually cares this time.”

“I care about people, Mica,” Jo said with a glare.

“Not like this.”

Jo shook her head but didn’t argue. Because honestly? she thought, Mica isn’t wrong.

His eyes gentle, Mr. Diaz studied her for a moment before nodding. “Sounds to me like she got scared,” he said. “Maybe she panicked.”

Jo sighed. “Yeah. But why?”

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“Could be a lot of things,” Mr. Diaz said with a shrug. “Maybe she’s not used to feeling something real.” He gave Jo a knowing look. “Kind of like you.”

“Great,” Jo said with a huff. “So we’re two emotionally stunted people who managed to find each other.”

Mr. Diaz chuckled. “Sounds like a good match to me.”

Evelyn drummed her fingers against the steering wheel as she waited at a red light, her mind drifting back to her conversation with Brooke. “You’re such a workaholic. This is why you don’t date.” Evelyn huffed, adjusting the heater dial even though she wasn’t actually that cold on the sunny April morning. Not dating wasn’t the problem. The problem was that when she finally met someone who made her heart race, she completely panicked and ran in the opposite direction. She sighed, shaking her head as she rolled forward when the light turned green. Maybe I should’ve stayed. The thought came out of nowhere, unbidden and unwelcome. Her grip on the wheel tightened. No. I did the right thing. I’m not ready for someone like Jo. Someone so sure of herself, so effortlessly charming.

As if sensing her inner turmoil, her car suddenly let out a deep, metallic clunk-clunk-clunk before jerking forward. Evelyn’s eyes widened. “What the—” A loud grinding noise followed, like metal scraping against metal, and the car lurched violently before settling into a rough, uneven shudder. Panic flared in her chest. “Oh no. No, no, no—” She glanced frantically at the dashboard, but there were no warning lights, only the awful noise still rattling from under the hood. She eased her foot off the gas, heart pounding. Please don’t break down, she thought. I can’t handle that right now. The car stuttered, as if in response, and Evelyn cursed under her breath. She was still at

least fifteen minutes from the research facility. If she tried to keep going, she would either end up stranded on the side of the road or worse cause serious damage to the engine. Her eyes darted to the passing storefronts, searching desperately for a solution.

And then she saw it. A garage. A sign hung above the entrance, the bold red and white lettering reading: FULLER'S AUTO REPAIR. Relief flooded her. A mechanic, she thought. Perfect. She flipped on her blinker and turned into the lot, the car protesting loudly as she pulled into an empty space near one of the open garage bay doors. The instant she shifted into park, the engine clunked one final time before going silent. Evelyn exhaled sharply, gripping the steering wheel as she tried to slow her racing heart. Okay. I can handle this. It is only a minor setback. She would go inside, explain the issue, they would fix it, and she would be on her way soon. Easy.

Unbuckling her seatbelt, she grabbed her purse before getting out to walk toward the building. The scent of oil, rubber, and faint traces of coffee hit her as she stepped toward the open garage bay. A few cars were parked inside, tools scattered across metal workbenches. A radio played softly in the background, the low hum of conversation drifting from somewhere deeper in the shop. Evelyn cleared her throat, hesitating at the entrance. "Hello?" she said. "Is anyone here?"

A husky woman's voice called from behind a car hood. "Be right there."

Evelyn exhaled, willing herself to relax. It wasn't a big deal. It was hopefully an easy problem, and she'd be gone before—

From behind the lifted hood, Jo stood. Evelyn's stomach plummeted. No, she thought as the tall, broad-shouldered woman remained focused on the car she worked on. No way. Evelyn watched Jo wipe her hands on a rag, taking in her short brown hair slightly tousled, and her familiar leather jacket discarded on a nearby stool. She had a smudge of grease on her muscular forearm, and when she turned fully, her brown eyes locked onto Evelyn's. For a second, Jo didn't react. Then, her brows lifted with

surprise in her eyes. Evelyn was pretty sure she felt her entire soul leave her body.

Jo blinked. “Evelyn?”

Opening her mouth, Evelyn tried to say something, but nothing came out. Jo took a step closer, her expression shifting from surprise to something far too amused for Evelyn’s liking.

“Well this is interesting,” Jo said, crossing her arms. “Didn’t think I’d be seeing you again.”

Evelyn’s fight-or-flight instincts screamed at her. She could run. Again. I can simply turn around and pretend this never happened, she thought. Get back in my car and leave. But then she remembered the sounds her car was making, and Evelyn groaned internally. She was trapped. “Hi, Jo,” she said, doing her best to keep her tone neutral.

Jo tilted her head, clearly enjoying the situation a little too much. “Hi. What brings you to my shop?”

Evelyn wanted the earth to swallow her whole, but she lifted her chin and forced a smile. “Actually,” she answered. “It’s my car. It broke down.”

“Did it now?” Jo asked as a slow smile crossed her face, taking a step closer.

Refusing to be intimidated, Evelyn stood her ground. “Yes.”

Glancing at the car, then back at Evelyn, Jo’s expression was entirely too smug. “Well,” Jo said, tossing the rag onto the workbench. “Guess it’s a good thing you know a mechanic.”

Evelyn groaned. She was never going to live this down.

Seven

Jo stood at the edge of the garage bay, arms crossed over her chest, watching Evelyn shift uncomfortably under her gaze. “So,” Jo drawled, letting the word roll off her tongue simply to see the way Evelyn’s jaw tightened. “I never really was the type to believe in fate, but this?” She gestured to the car, sitting in the parking lot. “This feels a little too perfect, don’t you think?”

Evelyn straightened. “It’s not fate,” she said, her voice clipped. “It’s an unfortunate coincidence.”

“Unfortunate for you, maybe,” Jo said with a wink. “I’m having a great time.”

“Are you going to help me or just stand there gloating?” Evelyn snapped.

Jo strolled to the workbench and grabbed a clipboard off a hook on the wall. “Oh, I’ll help,” she said, holding out the clipboard with a pen. “But you’ll have to stick around while I take a look. Fill out this intake form so everything is legit.” She grinned. “There’s a phone number field, but you can leave it blank if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Squaring her shoulders, Evelyn took the form. “I’m not uncomfortable,” she said. “I’m sure you will be entirely professional.”

Before Jo could respond, Mica’s voice came from behind her. “Well, this is awkward in the best way,” she said, clearly having been listening from inside the bay. “I’ll be in the office if you two need me. Or if you want an audience, I’ll gladly stay.”

Jo rolled her eyes. “Go on, Mica.” Mica tipped her baseball hat at Evelyn before

disappearing into the office, leaving them alone. Jo turned to Evelyn, who was suddenly very interested in the floor. “Keys?” Jo prompted, holding out her hand. Evelyn hesitated for half a second before reaching into her purse and passing them over. The brief brush of her fingers against Jo’s sent an unexpected jolt of awareness through her, but Jo ignored it, focusing instead on the task at hand. Oh no, she thought. I am not getting sucked into this again. After walking to the car, she slid her tall frame into the cramped driver’s seat, turning the key in the ignition. The car sputtered, let out a pathetic grinding noise, then stalled completely. Jo winced. “Oof. That’s not good.”

Evelyn groaned. “Tell me something I don’t know,” she said. “I was hoping for more of a diagnosis.”

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“I’m about to give one,” Jo said, unwinding out of the car. “Give me a minute.” She popped the hood then bent over the engine. As she examined the situation, she felt Evelyn’s eyes on her, and it took everything in her not to react. Let her look, she thought. See what she’s missing. Forcing herself to concentrate, she checked belts, fluids, and connections. A few minutes later, she straightened, wiping grease from her hands onto a rag from her back pocket. “Looks like you’ve got a busted serpentine belt. That’s what’s causing the noise and the rough idle.” She met Evelyn’s gaze. “You’re lucky you pulled in when you did. If it had snapped completely while you were driving, you’d be in a much worse situation.”

Exhaling, Evelyn pressed her fingers to her temples. “Great,” she said. “Just great.”

Jo watched her for a moment, then sighed. “Follow me,” she said, and was relieved when Evelyn followed her without protest. Without really thinking about it, Jo walked to the mini-fridge in the corner and pulled out a bottle of water. She twisted off the cap and handed it to Evelyn.

Evelyn blinked at her. “What’s this for?” she asked, and Jo shrugged.

“You look like you’re about to stress yourself into a headache,” Jo said. “Hydrate.”

After hesitating for a beat, Evelyn took the bottle. “Thanks,” she murmured, taking a small sip.

Crossing her eyes, Jo watched her carefully. “You know, you’re lucky I regularly stock that part,” she said. “Otherwise, you’d be stuck here for a while.”

“You have it?” Evelyn asked, hope in her voice.

“Yeah,” Jo said. “I can fix it this morning.”

Relief washed over Evelyn’s face, but just as quickly, she seemed to catch herself, straightening. “How long will it take?” she asked, and Jo smiled.

“Not long,” she said. “But long enough that you might as well get comfortable.” Evelyn blinked, looking torn between gratitude and still suffering from absolute mortification. Jo turned to grab her tools, and she let her voice drop slightly. “And don’t worry,” she added with her back to Evelyn. “I won’t even make you explain why you ran out on me last night. Not unless you want to.” When Evelyn didn’t answer, Jo closed her eyes for a beat. Don’t push, she thought. Just do the job. Without a word, she went back to the car, giving Evelyn plenty of space to think.

Sitting stiffly on a stool between the workbench and the front office, Evelyn’s hands were clasped tightly in her lap. The scent of motor oil and grease filled the air. She wasn’t sure what to do with herself, so she pulled out her phone, pretending to scroll through emails. Not that she could focus on a single word. Because Jo was right there. Bent over the hood of her car, sleeves rolled up, strong forearms flexing as she worked.

After she and Mica pushed the car into the garage bay, Jo got right to work. She moved with an ease that was impossible to ignore. Confident, capable, completely in her element, and humming softly under her breath, as if she wasn’t even aware of it. Evelyn swallowed hard and forced her eyes on her phone. This is ridiculous, she thought. I am a grown woman, not some lovesick teenager. She knew she shouldn’t be sitting there, aware of every little thing Jo did. She shouldn’t be noticing how effortlessly her strong hands handled the tools, or how— Evelyn’s phone vibrated, making her jump. It was Jasmine. Oh no.

She hesitated, glancing at Jo, who was still focused on the car. Maybe she should ignore it, but knowing her sister, that would only make things worse. With a sigh, she stood and took a few steps away, pressing the connect button before Jasmine could leave a message. “Hey,” she said, keeping her voice low.

“Hey?” Jasmine repeated, clearly unimpressed. “That’s all I get? I let you escape your own birthday party without a lecture, and now you’re trying to avoid me?”

Evelyn rubbed her temple. “I’m not avoiding you,” she said, knowing it was partially true.

“Uh-huh,” Jasmine said. “Now, are you going to tell me what happened last night, or do I have to assume?”

Stiffening at the question, Evelyn glanced toward Jo, who was still working but well within earshot. “Nothing happened,” she said quickly.

“What do you mean ‘nothing’?”

Lowering her voice, Evelyn sighed. “I left, okay?” she whispered. “Before anything really happened.”

“You what?” Jasmine asked, disbelief in her voice. “Evie, come on. You were flirting. I saw you flirting. Not that I’m a big fan of one-night stands, but everybody could see she was into you.”

Evelyn turned her back slightly, as if that would somehow stop Jo from hearing. “I panicked, okay?” she said. “And called an Uber.”

There was a long pause. “Why? Were you scared?” Jasmine finally asked, her voice softer now. “Did she...”

“God, no,” Evelyn said quickly, replaying the events of the night before in her mind yet again. “Jo was wonderful. Everything was wonderful.”

“I see,” Jasmine said. “You scared yourself.”

Trying to swallow, Evelyn’s throat tightened. She hated how perceptive her sister was. “I just...” She struggled to find the right words. “It was too much, too fast.” Behind her, Evelyn heard Jo moving under the car hood. The clink of metal against metal was sharp in the quiet.

Jasmine sighed. “Evie,” she said. “You like her, don’t you?”

Evelyn closed her eyes. “That’s the problem,” she murmured. “I do. I really do.”

Another pause and then a knowing hum from Jasmine. “Well,” she said. “I don’t know where you are right now, but if I were you? I’d figure out what you want before it’s too late.”

Opening her mouth to respond, Evelyn suddenly sensed Jo moving behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the woman setting her tools on the workbench. “I have to go,” Evelyn muttered. “I’ll call you later.”

“Evie—”

She ended the call before her sister could say anything else. Taking a deep breath, she turned to find Jo watching her. Evelyn’s stomach dropped. Jo didn’t say anything at first, only studying her with sharp, knowing eyes. For a moment, no one spoke. “So,” Jo finally said, voice casual. “Too much, too fast, huh?”

Evelyn’s face went hot. Jo had heard. Of course she did, she thought and opened her mouth, then closed it again, floundering for something, anything, to say. Jo lifted an eyebrow, waiting. Evelyn wanted to disappear.

Standing in front of the car, Jo watched Evelyn squirm under her gaze. She heard every word Evelyn said on that phone call. Too much, too fast, she thought. Shocker. Jo wasn’t sure why those words stung the way they did, but they lodged themselves somewhere deep, somewhere she didn’t particularly like to examine. Evelyn looked ready to bolt again, her grip tight around the phone in her hand. Jo saw the tension in her shoulders, the way she was bracing for something, probably a teasing remark. But for once, Jo didn’t feel like teasing. Instead, she reached for the small silver metal tin on the counter and popped the lid. Without a word, she held it out to Evelyn. The woman blinked. “What’s this?” she asked, and Jo shrugged.

“Chocolate chip cookie,” she replied. “Figured you could use some comfort food.”

Evelyn hesitated, then took a cookie carefully from the small pile, as if she wasn’t sure what to do with it. “Is this homemade?” she asked, returning her gaze. “Wait. Did you make this?”

“Yep,” Jo said. “Fresh out of the oven last night.” She gave Evelyn a half smile. “I had some unexpected time on my hands and couldn’t sleep.”

Blushing a little, but not taking the bait, the woman took a small bite. Her eyes widened slightly, and Jo felt a ridiculous surge of pride at the obvious approval on her face. “This is delicious,” she said. “I can’t believe you bake.

“Oh, sweetheart. There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

Evelyn’s blush deepened, but she took a bigger bite. “Wow,” Evelyn murmured, chewing. “It’s really good.”

Putting the lid back on the tin, Jo nodded. “I know,” she said as Evelyn ate the cookie. While she did, Jo took the moment to study her. The woman looked tired. Not only in a physical way, but in the way people looked when they were carrying too much in their head. Jo recognized it because she had seen it in the mirror a few times herself. She let out a breath and decided to throw something out there. “I’m heading to a classic car show over at the coast tomorrow.” She kept her voice light. “You should come.”

“What?” Evelyn asked after a beat, clearly caught off guard.

“Car show,” Jo said with a shrug. “It’s at Lincoln City. Good food, good people. Lots of beautiful automobiles.”

Evelyn shook her head slowly. “I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t really know anything about cars.”

“I’ll teach you,” Jo replied. The moment stretched between them. For a second, Jo thought Evelyn might actually say yes.

But then she shifted, looking unsure again. “I’ll think about it,” Evelyn said, her voice quiet.

Hiding her disappointment, Jo nodded. “Fair enough.” She turned back to the car, focusing on tightening the last bolt, giving Evelyn an out if she wanted to take it. When another minute passed, Jo sighed. I guess I’ll take that as a no, she thought, putting down the hood, ready to kick herself for even asking. At least I’m about done, and we can get back out of each other’s lives again. Without a word, she started the car and was satisfied when the engine purred. The car was ready to go. Climbing out, Jo handed Evelyn her keys.

“Thanks,” Evelyn said, her voice softer now.

Jo nodded. “Drive safe.”

She watched as Evelyn slid into the driver’s seat, started the engine, and pulled out of the garage bay. Jo stood there for a long moment, hands in her pockets, feeling something she wasn’t used to. Disappointment. She wasn’t sure what she had expected. Evelyn had made it clear she wasn’t ready for a relationship, and Jo wasn’t the type to chase. She never had been. But damn, she thought. This one feels different. With a sigh, she turned toward the workbench, grabbing a wrench to polish only to have something to do. And then she heard it. The sound of tires crunching on gravel. Jo turned in time to see Evelyn’s car returning to the end of the garage bay. Evelyn rolled down the window, looking slightly flushed. “I’ll go,” she said, her voice rushed, like she was afraid she would lose her nerve.

Jo blinked as she walked to the car window, closer to make sure she understood. “To the car show?” she asked, leaning down to look Evelyn in the eyes. Evelyn nodded. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Evelyn said. Then, before Jo could say anything else, the woman stretched

out the window and pressed a quick, soft kiss on Jo's lips. It was barely a brush, but it sent a shockwave straight through Jo's system. By the time she processed what had happened, Evelyn was already pulling away. "Call me." Just like that, Evelyn drove off again, leaving Jo standing there, completely and utterly stunned.

Touching her lips, Jo let out a slow, disbelieving chuckle. "Well, damn," she murmured to herself, already looking forward to tomorrow.

Eight

Standing by her window, Evelyn held the edge of the curtain as she peeked outside. She had been standing there for the past ten minutes, pretending she wasn't watching for Jo's car. But the truth was, her heart had been racing ever since she woke up, knowing today wasn't just another Sunday. Today, she was going on a date with Jo. A date, Evelyn thought as a flutter started in her stomach. Well, maybe not officially. Jo did call it a car show. Evelyn knew better. It was a date, whether Jo had used the word or not.

She exhaled, smoothing the fabric of her dress for the hundredth time. She had agonized over what to wear, torn between looking cute and looking like someone who knew anything about cars, which she did not. In the end, she had chosen a simple but flattering outfit of a fitted navy-blue dress that tucked in at the waist, paired with white sneakers. Casual, but still put together. She had debated on a jacket but ultimately left it behind. If it gets cold, maybe Jo will offer me her leather jacket again, she thought. The idea sent a thrill through her as she remembered the last time she wore it, and she shook her head at herself. Get it together. After what happened last time, I doubt Jo will be doing anything but being polite. She glanced at the clock. Jo would be there any minute.

Her mind drifted to their phone call the night before, the moment she replayed repeatedly since it happened. Evelyn had been curled up on her couch, her phone

resting on her stomach, hoping that Jo really would reach out. She had already surprised herself by agreeing to the car show, not to mention the impromptu kiss. Neither ensured Jo would follow through and call. I can't believe I was that bold, she had thought, biting her lip. What if I overdid it? That felt entirely possible. Evelyn feared that women coming on strong might be something of a turn-off to Jo. Before she could overthink it any longer, her phone buzzed. Jo was calling, and Evelyn's stomach flipped. She took a deep breath and answered. "Hey," she said, trying to sound casual.

"Hi there," Jo's voice was warm but seemed a tiny bit uncertain too. "Did you actually mean it? You're really willing to come with me tomorrow?"

Happy to hear Jo's voice, Evelyn smiled. "I meant it," she answered. "Absolutely."

There was a pause, and then Jo let out a breath. "I'm glad," she said, relief in her tone.

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“I should warn you, though,” Evelyn said. “I really do know nothing about cars.”

Jo chuckled. “That’s okay. I have enough knowledge for both of us.”

“Good to know,” Evelyn said with a laugh, relaxing slightly.

Another pause. This time, it was a more comfortable one. “I’ll pick you up at ten tomorrow,” Jo said. “Look for a silver classic beauty.”

Evelyn frowned. “A classic beauty?”

Jo’s sexy smile was evident in her voice. “You’ll know it when you see it.”

For a beat, Evelyn hesitated, then took a small leap. “Jo?”

“Yeah?”

“Well...” she started, about to lose her nerve. She closed her eyes. I’m excited to see you, she had wanted to say. I haven’t stopped thinking about you since the shop. You make me feel things I don’t know how to deal with. Instead, she had settled on “Drive safe.”

Now, standing by the window, Evelyn took a steadying breath, shaking off the nerves curling inside her. A low, rumbling engine suddenly filled the street outside her apartment, and her pulse jumped. She turned to look around the curtain again, in time to see a sleek, silver car with chrome accents pull up to the curb across the street. She didn’t know cars, but this one looked like something out of an old movie. It was the

kind of car that commanded attention, the kind that looked like it had stories to tell. Even from the third floor, she could see Jo behind the wheel, one arm resting casually on the doorframe, her sunglasses perched on her nose. There was an easy confidence in the way Jo carried herself, the way she belonged in that car.

Evelyn's breath caught. Oh, I am in so much trouble, she thought. She turned away from the window, pressing a hand to her chest. Okay. I can do this. Snatching up her small crossbody bag, she took one last look in the mirror, smoothing her hair. Then, before she could talk herself out of it, she grabbed her keys and headed for the door. As she stepped out of her apartment, the nerves didn't fade, but neither did the excitement.

Drumming her fingers against the steering wheel, Jo stole a glance at Evelyn in the passenger seat. The woman looked good in Jo's car. Maybe too good, Jo thought. She looks gorgeous sitting there. In her navy-blue dress, her blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders, Evelyn somehow looked both relaxed and slightly nervous, like she was still getting used to the idea of it all. Jo liked that. She liked that Evelyn had stepped outside of her comfort zone to come with her. So far, the drive from Portland to Lincoln City had been smooth, the winding roads lined with towering pines and stretches of rolling hills. The sky was overcast, but the April rain had held off so far. Jo hoped it would stay that way. A car show in the rain wasn't ideal, especially when she wanted Evelyn's first experience to be perfect.

As Jo shifted gears smoothly, the low rumble of the engine filled the quiet between them. "This is a nice drive," Evelyn said, looking out the window. "Peaceful."

"Yeah, it is," Jo said with an easy smile. "One of my favorite routes."

Evelyn glanced at her. "And this car..." She ran a hand along the edge of the seat, her fingers trailing over the leather. "It's amazing. I don't know what it is, but even I can tell it's special."

Grinning, Jo sat up a little straighter. “She’s a 1967 Pontiac GTO. A real classic.”

Raising her eyebrows, Evelyn shook her head. “Okay,” she said. “And what does that mean for someone who knows absolutely nothing about cars?”

Jo chuckled, keeping her eyes on the road. “It means she’s got history,” she replied. “The GTO was one of the first real muscle cars—American-made, built for power and style. This one? I rebuilt her myself. She was my first real project.”

Turning to her, interest sparked in Evelyn’s eyes. “You rebuilt it?” she asked. “Like from scratch?”

“Pretty much,” Jo said, pride creeping into her voice. “She was a mess when I got her. Rusted frame, engine barely holding together, and the interior was trashed. Took me over a year to get her back to this.” She patted the dashboard affectionately. “Had to track down some of the original parts, which wasn’t easy. And don’t even get me started on the wiring. Absolute nightmare.”

Evelyn’s eyes widened. “You did all of that yourself?”

Jo grinned, enjoying the way Evelyn looked both impressed and a little in awe. “Yeah. It was a challenge, but worth it. Nothing like bringing something back to life with your own hands.”

There was silence for a beat. “That’s actually really incredible,” Evelyn finally murmured, and Jo felt warmth spread through her chest. She was used to people being impressed by the car but hearing it from Evelyn felt different. Not sure what to say, Jo was a little relieved as she took the final stretch of road toward Lincoln City. The scent of saltwater drifted in through the open window, mixing with the crisp, pine-filled air. A few minutes later, Jo turned into the large parking lot at the convention center where the car show was being held.

Vehicles of every shape and size packed the lot. There were sleek vintage roadsters, bright muscle cars with their hoods popped open, and even a few tricked-out hot rods with gleaming chrome finishes. People milled about, admiring the cars, chatting with owners, and taking pictures. Evelyn's mouth parted slightly as she took it all in. "Wow," she breathed.

Jo parked the GTO and shut off the engine, watching Evelyn's reaction. "Surprised?"

Nodding her head, Evelyn's eyes were wide. "I guess I didn't expect all of this," she said, gesturing to the rows of cars, and the vibrant energy of the show. "It's kind of amazing."

"Told you," Jo said with a grin. "Cars have a way of drawing people in."

"I feel like I've stepped into another world."

Laughing, Jo opened her door. "Well, let me be your guide."

After they climbed out, Jo led Evelyn through the lot, pointing out a few of the standouts. "That's a '69 Camaro SS, one of the best muscle cars ever made," she said, nodding toward a deep-blue beauty. "And that over there? A '57 Chevy Bel Air. Absolute icon."

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Evelyn followed her gaze, nodding like she was trying to absorb everything. “I can see why people love this,” she admitted. “There’s something nostalgic about it.”

Jo smiled. “Exactly.” She could already tell Evelyn was seeing the appeal, and Jo was glad she got to experience this with her. As they walked deeper into the show, Jo felt something different, something she hadn’t expected. Today wasn’t simply another casual day out. Today meant something, and amazingly, Jo wasn’t afraid of it.

Evelyn could not stop talking. She knew it, but she couldn’t seem to help herself. As Jo pulled out of the parking lot, Evelyn was still rattling off details about the cars they had seen. Details she never would have paid attention to before today. “And that Mustang—what year was it again? Sixty-seven?” she asked, turning toward Jo in the driver’s seat.

Jo grinned, shifting gears with an easy confidence. “Sixty-eight.”

“Right! The Fastback,” Evelyn said, nodding to herself. “I can’t believe how much I liked it. And that deep green color? Gorgeous.”

Amusement flickered in Jo’s brown eyes when she glanced at her. “Look at you,” she said. “Throwing around car knowledge like a pro.”

Laughing, Evelyn shook her head. “Don’t get ahead of yourself,” she said. “I still don’t know what half of those engine parts do.”

“Well, you were a pretty great student,” Jo said, letting out a low chuckle. “I think I might’ve converted you into a car person.”

Evelyn bit her lip, happiness spreading through her. She had been worried she wouldn't fit into Jo's world, but today had been amazing. Jo had been patient, explaining things without making her feel like an outsider. And the way she talked about cars, the way her entire face lit up when she discussed their history and mechanics, was sexy as hell. She shifted in her seat, suddenly aware of the quiet between them. The energy in the car had shifted from the excitement of the show to something softer, more intimate, and she definitely wasn't ready for the day to be over.

Jo must have sensed it because she glanced over, one hand resting casually on the gear shift. "You hungry?" she asked. "We could grab some food before heading back."

Evelyn hesitated, then shook her head. "Not hungry yet." She hesitated again, choosing her words carefully. "But I wouldn't mind doing something else before we head back."

"Hmm," Jo hummed, her fingers tapped against the steering wheel as she considered. "There's a good coffee shop not far from here. We could grab something warm, and then..." She paused, meeting Evelyn's eyes. "I was thinking about heading over to Roads End. It's a quiet spot with a great view of the ocean. We could sit in the car for a bit, watch the waves. Maybe walk around if it's not too cold."

Feeling a wash of anxiety, Evelyn held her breath. It was a simple suggestion, but the idea of sitting in Jo's car, parked somewhere relatively secluded, with nothing but the sound of the waves between them... The idea made her nervous, but excited too. And I came on this trip to get to know Jo better, she thought. This is my chance. "That sounds nice," she said, keeping her voice steady even as her pulse quickened.

Jo nodded, and Evelyn noticed her grip on the wheel tightening slightly before she relaxed again. "Cool," she said, her voice pitched low, sending another thrill through

Evelyn. Notsure what else to say or do, she was relieved when Jo pulled into the lot of a small, charming café with a weathered wooden sign that read Driftwood Coffee Company. The place had a cozy, beach-town look with large windows reflecting the ocean in the distance and a few locals sitting outside with steaming mugs. Jo pulled up to the drive-thru window, where a young woman waited to take their order.

“What can I get you today?” she asked Jo.

“Black coffee,” she answered. “No sugar, no cream.”

“Of course you drink it black,” Evelyn said, wrinkling her nose.

With a smile, Jo chuckled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re exactly the type of person I’d expect to drink black coffee,” Evelyn teased. “Strong, no-nonsense, probably thinks lattes are for amateurs.”

Raising an eyebrow, Jo was clearly amused. “And what are you getting?”

Pursing her lips, Evelyn scanned the menu before deciding. “A vanilla oat milk latte.”

Jo snorted a laugh. “Figures.”

Evelyn crossed her arms. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Leaning in slightly, Jo lowered her voice. “You seem like the type who likes things a little sweet,” she said. “A little wholesome, but also a little fancy.”

Rolling her eyes, Evelyn couldn’t fight the smile tugging at her lips. “Well, excuse me for having taste. Life’s too short to deny the simple pleasures.”

Pausing for a moment at her words, Jo held her gaze and then nodded before turning to the barista. "One black coffee," she said. "And one vanilla oat milk latte, please."

A few minutes later, they were on their way. Evelyn took a sip of her latte, sighing contentedly. "This is perfect," she said. "A very good idea."

"Told you," Jo said with a smile. The view of the ocean drew closer, waves rolling in under the overcast sky. The sight of it made Evelyn's breath catch. She glanced at Jo, who was focused on the road, her expression unreadable. The day was turning into something more than she had expected, and as much as it made her nervous, she definitely didn't mind.

Nine

Jo shifted gears, the low purr of the GTO's engine filling the quiet space between them as they wound their way up the coastal road toward Road's End. The drive was smooth, the kind Jo usually found relaxing, but as the day moved slowly toward evening, there was a tension in her that had nothing to do with the road. She cut a glance at Evelyn, who cradled her coffee cup between her hands, her gaze flicking between the ocean and Jo. The sky had opened up a little, showing a touch of blue for a fleeting moment. Nothing but a tease, but it was enough to highlight Evelyn's blonde hair and fair skin, making her look even more beautiful than Jo already thought she was. Plus, there was the undeniable chemistry between them that kept making Jo's heart beat a little faster. If she was honest, all of it had her a little on edge. In a good way, but even that surprised her. It's almost like I'm nervous, she thought. Like I've never taken a drive with a pretty woman before. That was the problem. Jo Fuller didn't get nervous. She didn't hesitate. She didn't overthink things. But riding there, with Evelyn so close, Jo felt like she was standing on the edge of something she didn't quite understand.

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One thing she did understand though, was that every part of her wanted to kiss Evelyn again. The thought had lingered in the back of her mind all day. Actually it had been ever since Evelyn had surprised her by accepting the invitation to the car show. Don't forget the surprise kiss, Jo thought. That tiny, fleeting brush of lips had been enough to rattle Jo in a way she wasn't used to. As they rode along toward the wayside, with the two of them alone, the air thick with unspoken possibilities, Jo knew she could make a move. She could simply pull the car over into a secluded spot at the parking lot, cut the engine, and turn to Evelyn with her signature smile that usually made women melt. She could lean in, let her fingers trail over Evelyn's knee, and give her an infamous line, "Do you want me to kiss you?" Jo swallowed hard, gripping the wheel tighter. But the thing was, Jo couldn't decide what she would do if Evelyn said no. Hell, I'm not even sure what I will do if she says yes.

The road curved, and Jo spotted the parking lot up ahead. It was emptier than usual, with only a handful of cars scattered near the front. The sky was quickly growing heavy with clouds again, blocking out any blue and dimming the sunlight. The smell of salt and distant rain was thick in the air. It wasn't storming yet, but Jo had a feeling it might be before the day was over. She pulled into a space near the edge of the lot, where the view of the ocean stretched wide and uninterrupted. Cutting the engine, she exhaled slowly, trying to steady herself.

Evelyn shifted beside her. "It's beautiful here," she murmured, looking at the water.

Jo turned her head enough to watch her. Evelyn's face was soft, her lips slightly parted, her hands lightly holding her coffee cup on her lap. She looked kissable. So damn kissable. Jo wet her lips. Now's the time, she thought. Say something. Do something. She felt the weight of Evelyn's attention shifting toward her, the air

between them tightening.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. Jo sensed the question in Evelyn's posture, the slight tilt of her head, the way her breath hitched just enough to be noticeable. She knows, Jo realized. She knows I want to kiss her. And she's waiting for me to do it. Jo licked her lips. She could do it. She could lean in, close the space between them, and finally...

Nope, she thought. Not yet. Jo cleared her throat. "You want to go for a walk?"

Evelyn blinked, clearly caught off guard. A flicker of something crossed her face. Disappointment? Jo wondered. Amusement? She wasn't sure. But then Evelyn offered a small smile and nodded. "Yeah," she said. "I'd like that."

Jo nearly groaned. What am I doing? she asked herself. Why can't I just kiss her? It's not like we haven't already. Yet, as she stepped out of the car and walked around to meet Evelyn, watching as she wrapped her arms around herself against the cool breeze, Jo knew it was for the best. Because this thing between them was worth taking slow. Even if it killed her.

Evelyn pulled her arms tighter against her body. A gust of wind kicked up, carrying the scent of salt and something else. Something crisp and electric, like the promise of rain. She inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself. That was almost something, she thought. She wasn't imagining it. Jo was going to kiss me. Evelyn had felt it, seen it in the way Jo's body had gone still, in the way the air between them had thickened with unspoken possibility. And then...nothing. Nothing but an offer to go for a walk. Evelyn wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed. Maybe both.

Standing beside her, Jo's hands were shoved into her pockets, her posture easy but her eyes unreadable. "You good?" she asked, tilting her head slightly.

Nodding, Evelyn forced a small smile. “Yeah,” she said. “Just it’s colder than I expected.”

Jo’s gaze flicked over her, clearly assessing the situation. Evelyn knew she had made a mistake by not bringing a sweater at least. The wind was sharper here, cutting through the fabric of her dress, sending a shiver down her spine. “Here,” Jo said, shrugging out of her leather jacket. Evelyn opened her mouth to protest, but Jo was already holding it out to her. “Take it.” Jo’s voice was soft, considerate. “I don’t want you freezing.”

Hesitating only for a moment, Evelyn reached for it. The leather was warm from Jo’s body, carrying her scent. Somehow, Evelyn found it rich and familiar, like cedarwood and the smallest hint of motor oil. She pulled it on, and it was exactly like she remembered. The sleeves were too long, the shoulders too wide, and the weight of it settled around her in a way that made her feel safe. Jo watched her for a beat, her eyes darkening slightly. Evelyn swallowed. For a second, it felt like the moment was back. The one they had barely missed in the car. The wind whipped around them, Jo standing close, waiting like she was debating something. Evelyn’s breath held, and she half closed her eyes, ready for the kiss.

Suddenly, Jo took a step back. “Come on,” she said, jerking her head toward the sand. “Let’s walk.”

Exhaling slowly, Evelyn nodded. “All right,” she said, hearing the mix of confusion and relief in her voice. “Let’s walk.”

They made their way down the short path to the beach, their footsteps muffled by the soft sand. The tide was low, leaving behind a stretch of damp, darkened earth littered with bits of driftwood and scattered shells. The waves rolled in steadily, white foam curling at the edges before retreating again. Evelyn let herself relax into the rhythm of it, the steady push and pull of the ocean. Jo walked beside her, hands in her pockets,

her gaze scanning the shoreline. “You ever go looking for shells as a kid?” she asked after a moment, and Evelyn smiled a little.

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Jasmine and I used to come to the coast with our mom. We would spend hours digging in the sand, looking for the perfect ones.”

“Bet you found some good ones.”

“Mostly broken pieces,” Evelyn said with a small laugh. “But I didn’t care. I liked the idea that they had a history. That they had been whole once, and then the ocean had shaped them into something different.”

Glancing at her, there was something unreadable flickering in Jo’s expression, but she didn’t respond, and they walked together for a while, their feet sinking slightly with each step. Evelyn found herself scanning the ground, old habits resurfacing. She slowed when something caught her eye. It was a small, smooth piece of green sea glass half-buried in the sand. She bent, brushing the grains away before picking it up. The surface was cloudy, the edges soft and rounded.

Jo watched her curiously. “What did you find?”

Holding it up, Evelyn let the dim light catch on the hazy surface. “Sea glass,” she said. “It used to be a piece of a bottle, probably. But after years in the ocean, the sharp edges wear down, and it turns into this.”

Tilting her head, Jo studied it. “You’re saying that the ocean takes something broken and makes it beautiful?”

Evelyn’s fingers curled around the glass. She hadn’t thought of it that way before. “Yeah,” she murmured. “I guess it does.” As they stood there, Jo didn’t say anything, but she looked at Evelyn’s treasure like she saw something more than simply a piece

of glass in her hand. It made warmth spread through Evelyn's chest. Then, without warning, a drop of water landed on her cheek. Evelyn blinked, glancing up. Another drop. Then another.

Checking the sky, Jo groaned. "Ah, hell," she said. "This is not good." Within seconds, the drizzle turned into something heavier, fat raindrops splattering against the sand, the wind picking up as the storm rolled in faster than expected.

As the rain came down harder, Evelyn gasped as the cold hit her skin. "We should go back to the car."

"Run," Jo yelled, taking her hand. They took off, feet kicking up sand as they sprinted toward the car, laughter bubbling out of Evelyn despite the chill. The rain became a downpour, drenching them within moments, soaking through Evelyn's hair and Jo's T-shirt. By the time they reached the car, they were both breathless. Jo fumbled with the keys, cursing as she yanked open the door. Evelyn dove into the passenger seat, shivering as water dripped from her hair, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Jo raced around the front of the car before sliding in, slamming the door shut as the rain pounded against the roof.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. They were both soaked, breathing hard, the air thick with something that had nothing to do with the storm outside. Evelyn turned her head slowly, meeting Jo's gaze. Jo was looking at her like she wanted to say something. Or do something, Evelyn thought as her lips parted. The rain continued to fall, the world outside blurred and distant. Inside the car, everything felt impossibly close, and this time, neither of them moved away.

The rain drummed steadily against the roof of the GTO, blurring the outside world into streaks of gray and silver. Jo's breath was still uneven, her pulse thrumming in her ears as she sat there, soaked, staring at Evelyn. The woman was a mess in the best possible way. Her hair clung to her face in damp strands, and she had pulled the wet

leather coat around her. Her lips were parted slightly, her chest rising and falling as she tried to catch her breath. Jo swallowed hard as she flicked her gaze toward the parking lot. The other cars were gone. We're alone, she thought. It's just us. The realization sent something electric down Jo's spine.

Her entire body tensed with the need to close the space between them. She realized she had been holding back since she first laid eyes on Evelyn in Sapphire two nights ago, second-guessing herself in a way she never did. Even at her home, when the kisses had been red-hot, Jo had restrained herself, a part of her wanting to take it slowly for once. But now, with Evelyn looking at her like she was waiting, like she wanted everything as much as Jo did, there was no room for hesitation. She leaned in slowly, enough to give Evelyn the chance to pull away if she wanted to. She didn't. Instead, Evelyn met her halfway, and Jo could swear her heart was about to beat out of her chest.

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Their lips brushed, soft at first, tentative. A slow inhale, the taste of rain, and something warm and sweet. Then Evelyn made a small sound, barely more than a sigh, but it was enough to unravel Jo completely. She deepened the kiss. Evelyn responded immediately, her fingers gripping the front of Jo's wet shirt, pulling her closer, like she didn't want an inch of space between them. Jo groaned softly against her mouth. She tilted her head, tasting more of her, letting the heat coil between them. Evelyn wasn't shy, wasn't tentative. She kissed Jo like she had been waiting for it, like she had been holding back just as much.

Instinctively, Jo's hand slipped inside the leather jacket, tracing the shape of Evelyn's waist, memorizing every curve. Evelyn shivered under her touch, pressing closer. Jo exhaled sharply. She wanted more. She wanted to pull Evelyn into her lap, to explore every inch of her, to lose herself in the warmth of her body and the way she tasted like vanilla and salt and something entirely different. Something Jo was sure was entirely Evelyn.

Yet, when Jo's hand slid down Evelyn's thigh, wandering toward the hem of her dress, Evelyn slowed. Her hands, once urgent, softened against Jo's chest. Jo felt it immediately, the shift in energy, the hesitation creeping in. She pulled back. "Are you okay?" she murmured, voice rough with restraint.

Evelyn nodded, but Jo saw the uncertainty flickering in her eyes. "Yeah," she whispered. "I just don't want to go any further. Not yet. I'm sorry."

Jo exhaled, expecting to feel frustration, but instead, there was something peaceful settling inside her. She brushed a damp strand of hair back from Evelyn's face, her touch lingering. "Don't be sorry," she said softly. "We don't have to rush anything. I

promise.”

“Thank you,” Evelyn said, her lips curving into a small, grateful smile. “Next time, maybe?”

Jo pressed a final, lingering kiss to her forehead before pulling back completely, settling into her seat. She reached for the keys, and the car rumbled to life beneath them. “That’s good enough for me. Let’s get you home,” Jo said, casting one last glance at Evelyn, who still looked slightly dazed, her fingers touching her lips as if memorizing the moment. Smiling to herself, Jo pulled out of the parking lot. Yeah, she thought. Evelyn was definitely worth taking it slow.

Ten

Staring blankly at her computer screen, Evelyn’s fingers hovered over the keyboard, but the words on the document blurred. Her mind refused to focus, instead replaying the events of the past few days in an endless loop. More specifically, replaying Jo. The way Jo’s hands had felt on her waist. The way her lips had moved against Evelyn’s, slow and teasing, then deep and consuming. The way Jo had stopped the moment Evelyn had hesitated, no questions asked, only a gentle, reassuring touch. Evelyn exhaled sharply, pressing her fingers to her temples. I have got to stop thinking about this, she thought. I’m at work, for God’s sake. She had research to review, data to analyze, and most importantly, a business presentation to complete. It was not the time to be daydreaming about a certain leather-jacket-wearing mechanic and the way her voice got all low and husky when she whispered, “Are you okay?”

A soft “ahem” from the doorway snapped Evelyn out of her thoughts. She glanced from the keyboard, blinking as her coworker, Oliver, stood there, clutching a stack of files to his chest. His light brown hair was slightly disheveled as if he had run his fingers through it one too many times, and his glasses had slid down his nose. He pushed them up quickly, offering her a boyish smile. “Hey, Evelyn,” he said, shifting

his weight from foot to foot. “I, uh, didn’t mean to interrupt. You looked, um, deep in thought.”

If only he knew, Evelyn thought, but forced a polite smile, sitting up straighter. “Oh, no, you’re fine,” she said. “What’s up?”

Oliver hesitated before stepping fully into her office, setting the files on her desk. “Dr. Wong asked me to drop these off for you. Something about the sustainability report needing final revisions before the presentation next week.”

Evelyn groaned internally. Right, she thought. The presentation. The one she had been avoiding because all her brain power had been occupied with thoughts of Jo. “Thanks,” she said, flipping through the files absentmindedly. “I’ll take care of it.”

Lingering, Oliver shoved his hands into the pockets of his khakis. He rocked back on his heels, then cleared his throat. “So... how was your weekend?” he asked, and Evelyn glanced at him, startled by the question. Oliver never asked her personal questions or at least, not in a way that felt so expectant.

“It was good,” she said carefully. “Fun actually.”

“Oh?” Oliver asked, his face brightening. “What did you do?”

Evelyn hesitated. She wasn’t sure why, but saying I spent the entire weekend thinking about a ridiculously attractive woman, who makes me feel like my entire world has tilted on its axis didn’t seem like the right answer. Particularly not to Oliver. She settled on, “I went to a car show. With a friend.” Now that, she thought. Is an understatement.

A surprised look on his face, Oliver blinked. “A car show?” he asked. “Like the gas-powered kind?”

“Yes,” Evelyn said with a shrug. “It was surprisingly educational and a good time.”

Studying her for a beat, Oliver finally nodded. “Huh,” he said. “I didn’t know you were into cars.”

“I’m not,” Evelyn admitted. “But someone invited me, and I figured, why not?”

Oliver’s expression faltered slightly, but he recovered quickly, adjusting his glasses again. “Well, that’s cool,” he said. “I mean, it’s good to try new things, right?”

Smiling, Evelyn was relieved that he wasn’t pressing for details. “Exactly.”

Before Oliver could say anything else, the sharp click of heels against the tile floor signaled Dr. Linda Wong’s arrival. The department head strode into the office with her usual air of efficiency, her forest green blazer perfectly pressed, her dark hair pulled into a sleek bun.

She barely glanced at Evelyn and completely ignored Oliver before setting another folder down on the desk. “Evelyn,” Dr. Wong said briskly. “I need your final notes on the renewable energy proposal by the end of the day. We’re presenting to the board next week, and I want everything to be airtight.”

“I understand,” Evelyn said in a rush. “I’ll have it ready.”

Nodding once in approval, Dr. Wong turned to Oliver. “And you,” she said. “Stop hovering. Don’t you have work to do?”

Flushing slightly, Oliver adjusted his glasses. “Right. Yes. Of course.” He shot Evelyn a sheepish smile before scurrying out of the office.

Dr. Wong turned back to her, arms crossed. “Are you distracted today?”

“No, of course not,” Evelyn said a little too quickly. “I’m just—I’m just what?” she thought. Completely in knots over a strong, handsome butch I met only Friday?

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When Evelyn didn't finish, Dr. Wong raised an eyebrow before looking Evelyn in the eyes. "I need you focused, Evelyn," she said. "You are my top researcher, and I can't have you slipping now."

Appreciating Dr. Wong's words, but feeling the weight of the pressure they carried, Evelyn swallowed. "I understand," she said with a nod.

Studying her for a beat longer, Dr. Wong finally smiled a little. "Good," she said. "Then I'll expect those initial notes by five." With that, she turned on her heel and strode out of the office, leaving Evelyn deflating in her chair. She let out a breath, rubbing her temples. Distracted? she wondered. Who me? But is that really such a bad thing? Her phone buzzed on her desk, and she glanced at the screen, her heart doing a little flip when she saw Jo's name. A text message appeared.

"Hope your day isn't too boring." Jo's message said. "I'm currently covered in grease and thinking about how much better my Monday would be if you were here distracting me."

Warmth spreading through her chest, Evelyn bit her lip as she decided how to respond. Finally, she started to type. "I'd say I'm being very productive, but that would be a lie." She hesitated for a breath and then typed more. "All I can think about is how I should have let you keep kissing me in the car." She hit send before she could second-guess herself, her pulse hammering as she watched three little dots showing Jo was replying appear almost immediately.

"Oh, sweetheart," Jo wrote back. "You can't say things like that while I'm at work."

Evelyn smiled, feeling a thrill at Jo's reaction. "And why not?" she wrote.

"Because now all I can think about is kissing you again. And again. And again." Evelyn pressed a hand to her chest, her entire body tingling. Before she could reply, another message came through from Jo. "When can I see you again?" Evelyn's heart stuttered. She glanced at the pile of work in front of her, at the notes she had to finish, at the responsibilities that had always come first.

Then she looked at her phone, biting her lip for a second before typing. "Come over to my place for dinner on Thursday?" She hit send, then immediately panicked. Oh God. What if she says no? she worried. What if she thinks it's too soon? Or worse, what if I burn everything?

The three dots appeared again, and Evelyn held her breath. "You're cooking for me?" Jo's message asked.

Her hands suddenly shaking, Evelyn swallowed hard but forced herself to keep things light. "That's the plan."

"Now I'm even more intrigued," Jo sent. "What's on the menu?"

Staring at her phone, Evelyn had no idea. She hadn't thought that far ahead. "That's a surprise."

Jo's response was almost immediate. "I like surprises," she wrote. "It's a date."

Swinging her leg over her motorcycle, Jo pulled off her helmet as she parked outside the small, upscale wine shop on Hawthorne. The early evening air was cool as Jo walked across the parking lot, feeling unexpectedly nervous. Something that was ridiculous, because she had been on countless dates. She had charmed her way through dozens of dinners, late-night drinks, and heated kisses. But tonight was

different. Tonight, Evelyn invited me, she thought. To her place. To cook for me. It made her stomach do an unfamiliar flip.

Shoving her helmet under her arm, she stepped inside the wine shop, the bell above the door chiming softly. The place smelled like oak and spice, and the shelves were lined with bottles she didn't even pretend to understand. Wandering toward the reds, her eyes skimmed over the labels, and her confidence faltered. Should I go with something safe? she wondered. A Pinot Noir? Or something bolder, like a Shiraz? Jo sighed, rubbing the back of her neck.

"Need some help?" a woman asked. The voice was smooth, flirtatious, and when Jo turned, she was met with a strikingly beautiful stranger. Tall, with dark eyes and full lips, the woman smiled at her. Jo's usual instincts kicked in automatically. The kind that told her when someone was interested, when they were waiting for her to take the lead and start the familiar dance. Yet, for the first time in a long time, maybe ever, she felt nothing. Not even a flicker.

"Uh, yeah," Jo said, shaking off her surprise at her own lack of physical response. "I can't make up my mind."

The woman's smile widened. "Well, that depends on what you're looking for." She stepped closer, her fingers trailing lightly over the bottles. "Special occasion?"

Jo hesitated. Is it? she wondered. Or am I reading too much into this? She swallowed. "Yeah," she admitted. "Something like that."

Humming, the woman was clearly intrigued. "Hot date?" she asked, and Jo couldn't help but grin.

"Something like that," she repeated.

Tilting her head, the woman studied her. “You strike me as someone who goes for bold flavors.” She pulled a bottle from the shelf, stepping even closer to hand it to Jo. “This one’s rich, deep, a little smoky...” Her fingers touched Jo’s hand as she passed the bottle over, lingering a second too long. Jo paused. Normally, she’d be all over this. A beautiful woman, leaning in close, flirting without hesitation... that was her scene. But instead, all she could think about was Evelyn. About how much she wanted to see her face when she opened the door tonight. About how she wanted to watch Evelyn cook. About how she wanted to kiss her again, slowly and deeply this time, without hesitation.

Jo cleared her throat, stepping back slightly. “Sounds perfect,” she said, forcing a polite smile. “Thanks.”

The woman arched an eyebrow, clearly picking up on the shift in energy. “Lucky date,” she mused, but there was no real disappointment in her tone.

Chuckling, Jo shook her head. “Naw,” she said as she made her way toward the register. “I think I’m the lucky one.”

Evelyn took one last look around her apartment, resisting the urge to go check her appearance in the mirror one more time. In a loose flowing maroon skirt and a sleeveless white blouse, Evelyn felt confident that she looked attractive. In fact, everything was set. The table was neatly arranged, and the smell of garlic and herbs filled the air. She spent the last hour meticulously preparing dinner, double-checking recipes, and trying not to overthink every detail. All of that flew out the window the moment she heard the knock at the door. Her pulse jumped. It’s just Jo, she thought. I can handle this.

After taking a steadying breath, she pulled open the door and immediately forgot how to breathe. Jo stood there, leaning casually against the doorframe, one hand holding a bottle of wine. She had changed out of her usual work clothes, trading grease-stained

jeans for dark denim that hugged her hips in a way that should be illegal. A fitted black button-down stretched across her broad shoulders, the sleeves rolled up enough to reveal the strong forearms that had definitely been the subject of Evelyn's daydreams. And then there was the way she looked at her.

Jo's lips curled into a slow, knowing smile, her eyes sweeping over Evelyn's figure with blatant appreciation. "Damn," she murmured, her voice dropping into that husky register that sent a shiver down Evelyn's spine. "You look really good."

Evelyn swallowed hard, heat creeping up her neck. "You clean up nice yourself," she managed to say.

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Chuckling, Jo stepped inside and handed over the bottle of wine. “Thought I’d bring something to go with dinner,” she said. “Figured I should at least try to impress you.”

Smiling, Evelyn closed the door behind her. “Oh, I think you’re already doing a pretty good job of that.”

“Yeah?” Jo asked with a smile.

“Yeah.”

The air between them crackled, thick with anticipation, but Evelyn forced herself to move, leading Jo toward the kitchen. “Let’s open this,” she said, holding up the wine. “I could use a drink.”

Jo followed her. “Really? Are you nervous?”

With a sigh, Evelyn opened the wine and poured them both a glass. “A little,” she admitted, handing Jo her drink. “I only want tonight to go well.”

Taking the glass, Jo clinked it against Evelyn’s before taking a sip. “Relax,” she said, her voice warm. “It already is.”

Evelyn exhaled, some of the tension easing from her shoulders. “Good.” She reached for her phone, pulling up her favorite playlist. A sultry, bluesy guitar riff filled the air, followed by the unmistakable rasp of Melissa Etheridge’s voice.

Jo’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh, hell yes,” she said, her smile widening. “Good choice.”

Laughing, Evelyn took a sip of wine. "I aim to impress," she said as Jo set her glass down and, without warning, started singing along. And she was good. Really good, Evelyn thought. Can this woman get any sexier? Jo's voice was rich, smooth, effortlessly seductive as she sang the lyrics, locking her eyes on Evelyn's. Evelyn's breath caught under the sexy stare. "You sing?"

Swaying slightly to the music, Jo shrugged. "A little. When the song is right."

"A little? Jo, that was—"

Before she finished, Jo reached for her hand, tugging her gently toward the center of the kitchen. "Dance with me," she said. Evelyn hesitated, but before she could resist, Jo's hands were on her waist, guiding her effortlessly into a slow, rhythmic sway. The warmth of Jo's body and the deep hum of the music was intoxicating. Evelyn let herself relax into it, her hands resting lightly on Jo's shoulders, their bodies moving together in perfect sync. Jo's fingers skimmed along Evelyn's back, sending a shiver down her spine.

"You're dangerous," Evelyn murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh, I know," Jo whispered with a smile in her voice. Their movements slowed, the space between them shrinking. Evelyn's heart pounded as Jo's fingers traced the curve of her jaw, tilting her chin up slightly.

"Can I kiss you?" Jo murmured, her breath warm against Evelyn's lips. Evelyn barely had time to nod before Jo closed the distance. The kiss was slow at first, teasing, but when Evelyn let out a soft sigh against Jo's mouth, Jo deepened it, her hands tightening on Evelyn's waist. Evelyn melted into her, arms around her neck, pulling her closer, needing more. Jo groaned, pressing Evelyn against the counter, her body firm and warm against hers. The kiss turned heated, desperate, hands roaming, lips parting—

BEEP BEEP BEEP!

The oven timer shrieked through the kitchen. They froze, breathless, bodies pressed together. Jo was the first to laugh, her voice rough. “That was bad timing,” she said. “But I imagine you need to check that.”

With a groan, Evelyn nodded. “One second,” she said and slipped past Jo to open the oven door. Evelyn’s stomach sank. “Oh, God.” The salmon, which she had painstakingly topped with a marinade of garlic and herbs, was still completely raw. No heat came from inside the stove. Clearly she had made sure everything was perfect, except for turning on the oven. Evelyn covered her face. “I knew I was going to mess this up.”

Jo chuckled from beside her, clearly seeing the calamity. She gently pulled Evelyn’s hands away from her face. “Hey,” she said, tilting Evelyn’s chin up. “It’s fine. We’ll order pizza.”

“I wanted tonight to be perfect,” Evelyn said with a sigh.

Jo’s eyes softened. “It is perfect,” she said. “I don’t care about dinner. I just care about you.” Evelyn’s heart skipped a beat as Jo pulled out her phone. “There’s a place I know right around the corner. I fixed the owner’s car last week. Rush job.” Jo winked. “So he owes me. Dinner can be here in fifteen minutes. You cool with pepperoni, mushroom, and black olives?”

Evelyn exhaled a laugh, shaking her head. “Yeah, that works,” she said. “Thank you.”

As Jo placed the order, Evelyn leaned against the counter, watching her. Somehow, despite the disaster in the oven, despite her nerves, despite everything, their being together felt right. When Jo hung up the phone, turned back to her, and smiled her

sexy smile, Evelyn knew one thing for sure. The night was far from over.

Eleven

Leaning against the cushions, Jo stretched her arm along the back of the couch as she swirled the last of the wine in her glass. Near her, Evelyn, with her feet tucked beneath her, had her own glass cradled between her fingers. The pizza box sat open on the coffee table, a few slices left forgotten in favor of the easier indulgence of good conversation and good wine. “You know,” Jo said, tilting her head as she studied Evelyn. “For someone who claims not to be a car person, you sure seemed to enjoy yourself at that show.”

Evelyn scoffed but smiled. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Maybe I was only being polite.”

“Oh, sure,” Jo said with a smile. “And that wasn’t you geeking out over the Mustang?”

“I did not geek out,” Evelyn replied with a laugh.

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Letting out a low chuckle, Jo's fingers absentmindedly twisted her wine glass. "You totally did," she said. "You even asked me about the engine. Or don't you remember?"

Sighing, Evelyn shook her head. "Okay, I remember," she answered. "Part of it was a little geeking, but also I was trying to impress you."

Jo leaned closer. "Well, it worked," she whispered. Evelyn's cheeks flushed slightly, and moving back a little, Jo took a slow sip of wine. She enjoyed the way Evelyn was starting to relax. The earlier nerves she clearly felt when Jo arrived had faded, replaced by something softer. More open, Jo thought. Like she enjoys having me in her private space.

"You know what's funny?" Evelyn said, shifting slightly so she was more angled toward Jo. "I don't think I've ever dated someone who works with their hands like you do."

Intrigued, Jo raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What kind of people do you usually go for?"

Evelyn hesitated, and then her shoulders slumped. "You really want to know?" she asked, and Jo nodded.

"Absolutely."

"Honestly, I never really date," Evelyn answered. "And never a woman."

Pausing, Jo took in what Evelyn said. "I see," she said slowly. "And is there a reason

why?”

Swirling the wine in her glass, as if to buy some time, Evelyn finally shrugged. “I think I always took the safe route,” she answered. “Predictable.”

Narrowing her eyes, Jo hummed. “And I’m not predictable?” she said, keeping a playful tone in her voice.

Meeting her gaze, Evelyn’s lips curved slightly. “Not even a little,” she replied. “I would never have expected to be here right now with you.”

Jo grinned. “Good. The last thing I ever want is to be predictable.”

“I walked right into that, didn’t I?” Evelyn said with a smile.

“Evelyn,” Jo said, her voice dropping slightly before she finished her wine and set it on the coffee table. “You’ve been walking into new territory with me since the moment we met.” Evelyn’s breath hitched, and Jo saw it. The moment Evelyn let the chemistry between them grow into something stronger. Something charged. Evelyn set her wine glass down on the coffee table as if she needed her hands free for whatever was about to happen next.

Jo watched as Evelyn’s gaze dropped to her mouth, then back to her eyes. “You keep looking at me like that,” Jo murmured. “And I’ll think you have something on your mind.”

Not answering right away, Evelyn reached out, her fingers trailing lightly over Jo’s forearm on the back of the couch, a slow, deliberate touch that sent heat curling low in Jo’s stomach. “Maybe I do,” Evelyn finally said, her voice softer but more certain.

Feeling heat roll through her, Jo knew her control was slipping a little. “Yeah?” she

asked, her voice rougher than she intended.

Evelyn didn't respond with words. Instead, she moved. Slow and deliberate, she pulled her skirt higher, lifting herself onto her knees before swinging a leg over Jo's lap, straddling her with a confidence that made Jo's breath catch. Her hands instinctively found Evelyn's waist, steadying her, but she didn't tighten her grip yet. Not until she knew exactly where Evelyn wanted to take this. The woman settled against her, her body hot, her hands sliding up Jo's chest before resting lightly on her shoulders.

Her lips were parted slightly, and her eyes were half closed. "Still think I go for the predictable route?" Evelyn whispered.

Swallowing hard, Jo's pulse pounded as she looked at Evelyn, her grip on her waist tightening just enough to keep her there. "Not anymore," she murmured. "Definitely not anymore."

Her heart hammering as she straddled Jo's lap, Evelyn's hands trembled slightly as they rested on Jo's shoulders. She felt the heat of Jo's body through her clothes, the firmness of her muscles, and the way Jo's hands gripped her waist with a sense of possession that sent shivers down her spine. She was in uncharted territory, but she was determined to explore it. Jo's eyes were dark with desire, and it gave Evelyn confidence. She leaned in, her lips brushing against Jo's in a soft, teasing kiss that quickly deepened into something more urgent. Jo's mouth was hot and demanding, her tongue sliding against Evelyn's in a way that made her entire body ache with need.

Evelyn's hands slid down Jo's chest, feeling the hard planes of muscle beneath her shirt. She fumbled with the buttons, her fingers shaking with anticipation and nerves. Jo chuckled softly against her lips, a low, husky sound that sent a jolt of electricity straight to Evelyn's core. "You don't need to be nervous," Jo murmured, her voice

rough with desire. She helped Evelyn with the buttons, her own hands steady and confident. Evelyn held her breath as Jo's shirt fell open, revealing nothing but hot skin and small, naked breasts.

Tentatively, Evelyn reached and let her fingers trace the line of Jo's collarbone before sliding down to touch her breast. Jo's nipple hardened against her fingers, and Evelyn gasped at the sensation. She had never touched a woman like this, had never felt the softness of another woman's skin, the firmness of her breasts. It was intoxicating. Jo groaned, her head falling back against the couch as Evelyn's fingers explored her. She arched into Evelyn's touch, her own hands gripping Evelyn's hips tightly. "God," Jo whispered, her voice ragged. "That feels so good."

Excited, Evelyn pressed the nipple harder. "I want to taste it," she murmured. "Is that okay?" Jo nodded, and Evelyn slid down her lap until her lips found the tight nipple. She hesitated for a moment, unsure, but the way Jo's body responded to her touch gave her the courage she needed.

She flicked her tongue against the hardness, drawing out a low moan from Jo. "Oh yeah," she growled. "Like that." Evelyn felt wetness between her own thighs, the ache in her core that begged for release, and she sucked harder. In response, Jo's hands moved to Evelyn's breasts, her fingers finding her hardened nipples through the blouse. Evelyn gasped as Jo's fingers pinched and teased, sending waves of pleasure coursing through her. There wasn't a time she remembered ever being more turned on, and all with only a few touches. It was crazy, but she was on fire.

Pulling back, she looked into Jo's hungry eyes and saw everything she felt reflected in them. "Jo," she whispered, her voice barely more than a gasp. "Take me to the bed—"

But before she could finish her sentence, a sharp knock at the front door shattered the moment. Evelyn froze, her heart pounding in her ears as reality came crashing back in

and Jo's hands stilled on her body.

"Evelyn?" a distraught-sounding voice called from the other side of the door. "Are you in there? Please be home."

Evelyn's eyes widened as she recognized the voice. Sophie, one of her very best friends. She scrambled off Jo's lap, her hands shaking as she tried to straighten her blouse. Jo sat up and quickly buttoned her shirt.

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“I’m so sorry,” Evelyn whispered, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and frustration.

Jo offered her a small smile. “It’s okay,” she said, her voice still rough. “Go see to your friend. We can pick this up later.”

Evelyn nodded, taking a deep breath to steady herself before walking to the door. She still felt the lingering heat of Jo’s touch, the ache of unfulfilled desire in her core. But for now, she had to put that aside. She had to be there for her friend.

Jo sat on the couch, still catching her breath, her body humming with need as Evelyn scrambled to straighten her skirt. She groaned, resting her head back against the cushions, staring at the ceiling as she tried to collect herself. An unexpected visitor was not how she hoped the night would end. The sharp knock at the door had killed the moment like a cold bucket of water, and now Evelyn rushed to answer it while Jo sat there, painfully aware of how close they had been to something incredible. Evelyn glanced over her shoulder, mouthing, “I’m so sorry.”

Exhaling a slow breath, Jo shook her head, but she couldn’t help but feel a bit amused. She nodded and mouthed back, “You owe me.” Evelyn’s face flushed as she turned to the door, hesitating for a beat before pulling it open.

The second she did, a blur of motion pushed inside. “Oh my God, Evelyn!” Jo blinked as a woman she vaguely remembered practically collapsed into Evelyn’s arms, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

Evelyn stiffened for half a second before wrapping her arms around her, concern on

her face. “Sophie? What happened?”

“He broke up with me,” Sophie wailed, gripping Evelyn tightly. “I’ve been texting you for the last hour. Why weren’t you answering?”

Letting out a slow breath, Jo ran a hand down her face. Well, I can answer that one, she thought. Evelyn shot Jo a guilty look over Sophie’s shoulder, and Jo saw the apology in her eyes. And gratitude is there, too. Because I’m not making this harder than it already is. Jo sighed, pushing off the couch. Time to go.

She stood, stretching her arms over her head, and caught Evelyn’s gaze as she did. She made sure to smile sexy enough to remind Evelyn exactly what they had been doing before the interruption. Evelyn blushed, but desire still lingered in her eyes. Strolling toward the door, Jo stopped behind Evelyn. She leaned in, dropping her voice to a low murmur, only for her. “Guess we’ll have to finish this another time,” she whispered. Evelyn inhaled sharply, but didn’t respond. Satisfied, Jo straightened, plastering on a polite smile as she turned to Sophie, who stood sniffing. “Hope you feel better,” Jo said smoothly. “She’s a good listener.”

Sophie blinked at Jo in confusion, then glanced between her and Evelyn, before realization dawned in her tear-streaked eyes. “Oh,” she sniffled. “Ohhh.”

“Sophie—” Evelyn started, but Jo was already stepping back.

“See you later,” Jo said with a smile and one last look at Evelyn that promised she wasn’t done with her yet. Then she walked out the door and jogged down the stairs. Stepping outside, the night air held a hint of rain coming. I hope that holds off for fifteen minutes, she thought as she swung her leg over her motorcycle, tugging her helmet on with a huff. She exhaled slowly, gripping the handlebars, trying to shake off the frustration still thrumming through her. “Blocked by a best friend,” she muttered to herself. “Classic.”

The engine roared to life beneath her, and she took off, weaving through the quiet Portland streets. Normally, a late-night ride would clear her head, but tonight, all it did was remind her of how close she had been to something she wasn't quite sure what to do with. Evelyn, Jo thought, clenching her jaw, and shaking her head. What the hell is she doing to me? She had passionate nights like that before. Moments of heat, of tension, of bodies pressed close. But this? It wasn't only about the physical. It was something deeper. She should be annoyed. In fact, she should be frustrated out of her mind, and she was a little. But mostly. I just want to see Evelyn again. And that was the part that scared her.

By the time Jo pulled into her garage, she knew sleep wasn't happening anytime soon. She was far too restless, so she did the only thing that ever really helped and headed straight for the kitchen. Pulling out flour, sugar, and chocolate chips, she let muscle memory take over, measuring ingredients with practiced ease. There was something calming about the process. The way the dough came together, the light scent of vanilla, the sound of the mixer. It's ridiculous, really, she thought as her mind returned to Evelyn. She's barely been in my life for a week, and yet here I am baking at midnight because I don't know what else to do with the way I feel. Scoffing at herself, she shook her head. "I think I'm in trouble," she muttered. "Big trouble."

By the time the cookies were out of the oven, golden and perfect, Jo had almost convinced herself to simply go to bed. Give herself a rest from Evelyn, but then she grabbed her phone, snapped a picture of the cookies, and sent it to Evelyn with a message. "Couldn't sleep. This is your fault. Hope your friend is okay."

A few minutes later, her phone buzzed with a text from Evelyn. "I feel terrible. You were very patient. I owe you."

Jo grinned and typed back. "Oh, I know. And I plan on collecting." A pause. Then, Evelyn sent back a single emoji. An orange flame. Jo chuckled, shaking her head as she took a bite of a still-warm cookie. "Yeah," she murmured to herself, licking

chocolate off her thumb. “Definitely in trouble.”

Twelve

Sitting at her kitchen table, Evelyn frowned at her laptop screen, her fingers drumming against the wooden top as she stared at the half-finished presentation in front of her. She got up extra early to work on it, but she had sat there for the past thirty minutes, attempting to focus. Unfortunately, her mind refused to cooperate. Instead, it kept drifting back to last night. Jo’s hands on her waist, the feel of her breast, the way heat had filled her body... until Sophie had knocked on her door, bringing everything to an abrupt halt. Evelyn groaned, rubbing her temples. She wasn’t mad at Sophie. Her friend had been genuinely upset, but the timing had been excruciating.

Feeling restless, frustrated, and maybe a little bit guilty, Evelyn wasn’t sure what to do next. Jo had been patient. More patient than Evelyn had expected. Even when she had every reason to be annoyed, Jo had smiled and taken it in stride, walking out of Evelyn’s apartment with that maddening confidence that still made Evelyn’s pulse flutter. Maybe I should do something nice, Evelyn thought, biting her lip. A small thank you. Her eyes flicked to the clock. It was still early enough to make a quick stop before work. She grabbed her phone and keys and slipped on her coat as she headed out the door.

Ten minutes later, Evelyn stepped into her favorite coffee shop. She ordered two large coffees, one black, and one a vanilla oat milk latte, plus a box of assorted scones. As the barista handed her the drinks, Evelyn hesitated and then added a third black coffee to her order. Just in case Mica is working today, she thought. I could use some brownie points with her too.

By the time she pulled into the lot outside Jo’s garage, the morning was in full swing. The large bay doors were open, and the sounds of metal clanking and a low hum of

voices filled the air. As she walked toward the garage door, Evelyn spotted Jo immediately. She stood beside a car up on a lift, inspecting something underneath. The sight sent a thrill through Evelyn's chest, and she bit her lip to contain herself. Mica stood beside Jo, looking at whatever Jo pointed at, as did an older man with salt-and-pepper hair who looked entirely at home in the garage. Hoping she wasn't interrupting something important, Evelyn took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and walked closer.

Jo glanced from her work at the sound of footsteps, and when she saw Evelyn, her lips curved into a slow, knowing smile. "Well hi," she said. "Look who decided to visit."

Mica turned, eyebrows lifting in surprise before she grinned. "Evelyn," she said. "Hey, what brings you here?"

Evelyn lifted the coffee tray. "I come bearing gifts," she said, and Jo's grin widened.

"Now that's the kind of visitor I like," Jo said, and Evelyn smiled as she handed Jo her coffee. "Black, no sugar, no cream," she said. "Exactly how you like it."

Jo took the cup, her fingers brushing against Evelyn's in a way that felt entirely intentional. "You remembered," she said, her voice low and amused.

"Of course I did," Evelyn said, ignoring the way her stomach fluttered so easily.

Mica let out an exaggerated gasp. "Wait, I get one too?" she asked, accepting the second cup Evelyn handed her. "Damn, Evelyn, you're spoiling us."

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“I figured it was the least I could do,” Evelyn said. “I know you’re working hard.”

A soft throat-clearing caught her attention, and Evelyn turned to find the older man watching her with a twinkle in his brown eyes. “And who might this be?” he asked, his voice warm with curiosity.

Smiling, Jo nodded toward the man. “Mr. Diaz, meet Evelyn. Evelyn, this is Mr. Diaz,” she said. “My mentor, former owner of the garage, and the man who taught me everything I know.”

Extending her hand, Evelyn smiled. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Mr. Diaz shook her hand firmly, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “You as well,” he said. “And let me guess, you’re the one making our Jo all distracted lately.”

Evelyn’s cheeks heated, and Jo groaned. “Mr. Diaz,” she said.

“What?” Mr. Diaz said innocently. “I’m only saying, it’s nice to see her bringing coffee and all.”

Feeling a little bad, Evelyn shook her head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t bring you one. I didn’t know you’d be here.” She quickly opened the pastry box. “But I did bring scones. Please, help yourself.”

Letting out a chuckle, Mr. Diaz reached for a scone. “I shouldn’t be drinking coffee anyway,” he said. “Doctor’s orders.”

Evelyn laughed, relaxing slightly. There was something undeniably warm about the older man, and the way he looked between her and Jo made her feel both flustered and oddly charmed.

Mica took a sip of her coffee, then shot Evelyn a look. “So,” she started. “You coming to Sapphire tonight?”

“I can’t,” Evelyn said, shaking her head. “Too much work. Maybe even all weekend.”

“Boring,” Mica said, drawing out the word.

Evelyn saw Jo arch an eyebrow. “No distractions for you, huh?” the woman asked, a suggestiveness to her tone, and Evelyn met her gaze.

“I didn’t say that,” she said, trying not to blush.

“Good,” Jo said with a sexy smile, and Evelyn had a feeling she’d be thinking about that smile for the rest of the day.

Jo wiped a hand across her forehead, smearing a bit of grease in the process, but she didn’t care. The day had been long, filled with back-to-back repairs, but her mind hadn’t been one hundred percent on work. It was on Evelyn. She was still thinking about the way Evelyn had shown up that morning, coffee and scones in hand, her smile a little shy but warm. It had been unexpected, and Jo wasn’t used to that kind of thoughtfulness. The women she usually spent time with weren’t the type to bring her coffee just because. But Evelyn did, she thought, stepping back from the car she had finished working on. And damn if that doesn’t make me feel special. Before she could dwell on the thought, Mica’s voice cut through the garage. “Hey, what time are we heading to Sapphire?” she asked. “It’s almost quitting time.”

Taking a rag from her back pocket, Jo frowned. “We?”

“Yes, we,” Mica replied. “As in, you and me, like every other Friday night.”

Jo hesitated as she wiped her hands, feeling an odd reluctance she wasn't used to. Normally, she would be ready for a couple of beers at the bar after a hard workday, especially on a Friday. But tonight? she thought. Tonight, I'm not really feeling it.

“I don't know, Mica,” she said, putting the rag back into her pocket. “I might take it easy tonight.”

Mica narrowed her eyes. “Oh no,” she said. “No way.” She crossed her muscular, tattooed arms. “Let me guess. You don't want to go because Evelyn isn't coming?”

“That's not it,” Jo said a little too quickly.

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

Jo sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Look,” she said. “I just don't know if I feel like the whole scene tonight.”

“Jo, come on,” Mica said with a dramatic moan. “You love the scene. You are the scene.” She pushed Jo's shoulder. “Besides, it's only a night out on a Friday. You can still have fun without Evelyn.” Jo hesitated, and Mica pounced. “Unless...” She dragged out the word. “You're already so attached that you feel like you need her permission to go.”

“That's ridiculous,” Jo snapped. “It's only been a week. We hardly know each other.”

Mica grinned. “Is it?” she asked. “Because that's not how it's sounding to me.”

Lifting her chin, Jo met Mica's eyes. “Fine,” she said. “I'll go.”

“That’s the buddy I know,” Mica said, almost beaming.

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Snorting a laugh, Jo started toward the back. “Give me ten. I’ll change.” She made her way to the restroom at the back of the garage, peeling off her grease-stained T-shirt and swapping it for a clean, fitted black one. She ran her fingers through her hair, giving herself a once-over in the mirror. She looked the same as always. Confident, casual, and ready for a good time. So why does this feel different? she wondered and frowned at her reflection. Damn it, it’s only been a week. I can’t be that hooked already. Right? Shaking off the thought, she took one last look at herself and headed back to the garage. Mica was already waiting by the side exit door, grinning like she had won something. Jo shook her head but smiled. “Let’s go. Time to remind everyone why I’m the reigning champion of Sapphire.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to see this,” Mica said, rubbing her hands together.

Jo chuckled, but as they stepped outside, a small voice in the back of her mind whispered that maybe the night wouldn’t be as fun as it used to be.

Evelyn sat at her desk, her eyes scanning the data on the monitor in front of her. The numbers blurred, and the graphs were meaningless as her mind drifted, once again, to Jo. She sighed, rubbing her temples. Focus, she commanded herself. You have a board presentation to finish. Unfortunately, her brain had other ideas. Specifically, ideas about Jo’s hands on her body, and the way she always looked at Evelyn like she was something...What? Special? That didn’t feel like the right word. Fun? Maybe even pretty? Then a realization came to her. She looks at me like I’m something she wants.

Swallowing hard, Evelyn shifted in her chair to help ease the tingle inside her. This is ridiculous, she thought. I’m at work. I need to stop thinking about her. And her hands. And her mouth. And...She exhaled sharply and forced her attention back to the

presentation, determined to make progress. Dr. Wong had been clear. The presentation needed to be flawless. Evelyn had never been one to miss a deadline, and she wasn't about to start now, no matter how distracting a certain leather-jacket-wearing mechanic might be.

Just as she started to regain her focus, a knock at her office door made her jump. She looked up to see Oliver standing there, holding a brown paper bag with the logo of the Thai place down the street on it.

"Hi," he said, offering an awkward smile. "I figured you might be working late, so I grabbed some takeout. Thought you could use a break."

"Oh," Evelyn said after a beat. Oliver's visit was entirely unexpected. "That's really thoughtful. Thank you."

Oliver stepped inside, setting the bag on the small table near the window. "No problem," he said, pushing his glasses up with his index finger. "I mean, I know how intense these board presentations can be. Figured you could use some fuel." He smiled shyly. "The brain uses a lot of calories."

Touched by the gesture, Evelyn smiled. "I appreciate it." She stood, stretching before walking to the table and opening the bag. The scent of exotic spices wafted up, making her stomach grumble. "This smells amazing."

Taking a seat across from her, Oliver smiled widely. "I got your usual," he said. "Spicy eggplant with tofu."

Even more surprised, Evelyn's eyebrows lifted. "You remembered?"

"Yeah, well," Oliver said with a shrug, looking a little bashful. "We've worked together for a while now."

“I suppose that’s true,” Evelyn said, taking a seat and opening the containers.

They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the quiet hum of the office filling the space between them. Evelyn felt herself relax a little, grateful for the break. After a moment, Oliver cleared his throat. “So, um...” He hesitated, then set his chopsticks down. “I was thinking, since we both work late all the time, that maybe we could grab dinner sometime? Outside of work, I mean.”

Evelyn froze, her stomach twisting. “Oliver...” She set her container down carefully, looking at her coworker with gentle but firm resolve.

He winced under her gaze. “Too much?” he asked, and Evelyn sighed, offering him a small smile.

“You’re a great coworker, Oliver,” she said. “And a great friend. But I don’t date people I work with.”

Exhaling, Oliver nodded quickly. “Right,” he said. “Yeah. I figured that might be the case.” He let out a small laugh. “Can’t blame a guy for trying, right?”

Reaching across the table, Evelyn gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. “I really do appreciate the food,” she said. “And you.”

There was a flicker of disappointment in Oliver’s eyes, but he managed a smile. “Yeah. No worries.” He picked up his chopsticks again, focusing intently on his food. Before Evelyn could say anything else, the sharp click of heels echoed from the hallway.

A moment later, Dr. Wong appeared in the doorway, her arms crossed. “Evelyn,” she said, her tone brisk. “I trust you’re making progress on the presentation?”

Evelyn straightened immediately. “Yes, Dr. Wong,” she answered. “I was only taking a quick break.”

Dr. Wong’s sharp gaze flickered to the takeout containers before returning to Evelyn. “Good. Because I expect the final draft on my desk by Monday morning.”

“I understand,” Evelyn said. Dr. Wong gave a single, approving nod before turning on her heel and striding away. Evelyn let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She glanced at Oliver.

He gave her a sympathetic look. “She’s intense,” he said, and Evelyn smiled wryly.

“That’s an understatement.”

After another few quick bites of the food, she checked the time on her phone, surprised it was almost nine. Her stomach dipped slightly when she saw she had no new messages. Nothing from Jo. She bit her lip, debating whether or not to text first. She’s probably just busy, Evelyn reasoned. After all, it is Friday night. She hesitated for another moment before finally typing a quick message. “Hope your day wasn’t too exhausting. Thinking about you.” She hit send, then set her phone down, trying not to overthink it. Minutes passed with no reply. Evelyn frowned. That’s weird. Where is she? Then a thought crept in before she could stop it. Did she go to the bar?

She had no reason to be upset if she had. Jo was free to do whatever she wanted. They barely knew each other. But still...she thought. Evelyn sighed, leaning back in her chair. She trusted Jo wasn’t toying with her and that she wouldn’t be looking for some other hook-up tonight. Right? She glanced at her phone again, willing it to light up with a response. Nothing. With a frustrated sigh, she pushed her food aside. “Time to get back to work,” she told Oliver as she collected the empty containers.

“Is everything okay?” Oliver asked, helping to clean up.

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Evelyn paused. Is it? she wondered for a moment before smiling at her coworker. “Yes, nothing to worry about.”

Nodding, Oliver picked up the sack full of trash. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll take this to the dumpster.” He hesitated, like he was going to say something, but then shrugged. “I hope the rest of your evening goes smoothly.”

Hoping so too, Evelyn smiled. “I’m sure it will,” she said. “Thank you again.”

As Oliver left, Evelyn turned back to her laptop, determined to drown out the uneasy feeling curling in her stomach with work. Yet, as time ticked by, no matter how hard she tried, Evelyn couldn’t shake the image of Jo at the bar, laughing, flirting, maybe even dancing with someone else. I’m being silly, she thought. Jo can do whatever she wants. Moving the mouse, Evelyn started to work again, but deep down, she hated how much it all bothered her.

Thirteen

The bass thumped through Sapphire, vibrating in Jo’s chest as she leaned over the pool table, lining up her shot. It was late, and the club was packed with bodies pressed together on the dance floor, and bursts of laughter and conversation barely cutting through the music. The neon glow from the bar cast flickering colors across the crowd, and the air smelled like a mix of spilled drinks, perfume, and sweat. Jo exhaled, tuning out the noise as she focused on the cue ball. She pulled back, aimed, and with a crack, the solid yellow ball rolled smoothly into the side pocket. “Damn,” Mica muttered, shaking her head as she took a sip of her drink. “I don’t know why I even bother playing with you.”

Straightening, Jo half smiled. “You keep thinking you’ll get better,” she said, and Mica snorted a laugh.

“No, I keep thinking you’ll get drunk enough to suck at this.”

Jo chuckled, but the truth was, she wasn’t drinking much tonight. Her beer sat mostly untouched on the edge of the table. She wasn’t in the mood to get wasted. Hell, she thought. I’m not really in the mood to be here at all, but Mica keeps egging me on.

As if reading Jo’s thoughts, Mica crossed her arms. “Okay, seriously,” she said. “You’re playing pool like you’re in a tournament, you’ve barely touched your drink, and you haven’t flirted with a single woman all night.” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re thinking about her, aren’t you?”

Sighing, Jo rubbed the back of her neck. “Mica—”

“You so are,” Mica said with a gasp.

Jo shook her head but didn’t deny it. She was thinking about Evelyn. About how she had expected a text from her by now. About how she wasn’t really interested in being here anymore. She pulled her phone from her pocket to check the time, pressing the button on the side. Nothing. The screen was blank. “Shit,” she muttered, and Mica shook her head.

“Wow. She really has you wrapped around her finger already.”

“No,” Jo said, tossing her cue stick onto the table. “My phone’s dead. I’m gonna see if Jess has a charger.” She made her way toward the bar, weaving through the crowd. The music shifted, a pulsing beat vibrating through the floor as the DJ transitioned into a remix of a ‘90s pop hit. Jo barely noticed. She reached the bar, flagging Jess down. “Hey. My phone’s dead. You got a charger?”

Jess nodded. “Yeah, give me a sec.” She ducked behind the bar, rummaging through a drawer before pulling out a cord. “iPhone?”

Nodding, Jo handed over her phone. “You’re a lifesaver,” she said as Jess plugged it in.

“Give it a few minutes,” she said. “This is a rapid charger. You should have enough juice soon.”

Exhaling, Jo leaned against the bar. “Thanks,” she said as she ran a hand through her hair, debating whether she should simply call it a night. She wasn’t drunk, she wasn’t interested in flirting, and honestly, she’d rather be somewhere quieter. Like maybe curled up on a couch with Evelyn, listening to her talk about whatever research she is doing or something, she thought, shaking her head at herself. Damn, Mica’s right. I’ve got it bad. Before she could dwell on that realization too much, a voice behind her cut through the noise.

“Oh hell no,” the voice said. “If it isn’t Jo Fuller.” Recognizing the voice, Jo turned, and a wide smile spread across her face.

Standing in front of her, looking effortlessly cool as ever, was Carly Hooper, an old friend from college. “Carly?” Jo’s grin widened. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Carly laughed, stepping forward and pulling Jo into a tight hug. “I moved back to Portland,” she said. “Got a job at an architecture firm downtown. Wow, it has been a long time since I saw you.”

Jo hugged her back, genuinely thrilled. Before she met Mica, back when she was in college, Carly had been one of the few people who had really understood her. They had spent a lot of nights drinking cheap beer, playing pool, and talking about life. They had never been lovers, but they were close buddies.

When they pulled apart, Carly laughed. “You look good.”

“So do you,” Jo said as Carly slung an arm around Jo’s shoulders, leaning in close to talk over the music. “So tell me. Still breaking hearts left and right?”

“Come on,” Jo said with a shake of her head. “You know me better than that.”

Carly shook her head. “Oh, yeah,” she said. “I definitely know you better than that.”

They fell into easy conversation, catching up, laughing over an old story about ditching Economics class. Jo was mid-laugh, shaking her head at something ridiculous Carly said, when suddenly, she felt it. That unmistakable sensation of being watched. Jo turned her head, and her stomach dropped.

Standing only a few feet away, looking very unimpressed, was Evelyn. Jo’s grin faltered. “Evelyn?” The woman’s arms were crossed over her chest, her expression carefully neutral, but Jo saw the tension in her shoulders and the way her jaw was clenched. That’s when Jo realized Carly’s arm was still around her. Shit, Jo thought. And we are standing very close together, laughing and having fun.

“Oh,” Carly said, glancing between them as she stepped back, clearly picking up on the shift in energy. “Uh-oh. Did I walk into something?”

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Swallowing hard, Jo stepped toward Evelyn. “Hi,” she started, and when Evelyn didn’t reply, she held up her hands in surrender. “It’s not what it looks like.”

Evelyn arched an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Jo sighed, knowing that standing in another woman’s arms was not how she wanted Evelyn to find her tonight.

As she took in the scene in front of her, Evelyn’s stomach twisted. Jo. Standing at the bar with another woman’s arm draped casually around her shoulders. The two of them were close, laughing together in a way that looked easy and very familiar. Jo’s face was lit up in that confident way Evelyn had come to recognize when she was completely in her element. Like at the bar the first night, like at the car show, and even at her garage.

Already regretting it, Evelyn had come to Sapphire on impulse. She hadn’t planned it. She had been sitting at her desk, waiting for Jo to text her back and feeling a little irritated for even caring so much that there hadn’t been an answer when the idea had struck her. I should just go to Sapphire and say hi, she had thought. And if she’s there, we can dance and if she’s not, I’ll go home.

But now, there she was, and there Jo was, with someone else. When she first stepped inside and saw what Jo was doing, Evelyn’s initial instinct was to turn around and walk out. Hopefully get away before Jo even saw her, but then Jo’s eyes met hers, and everything inside her froze. For a split second, Jo even looked guilty. Not caught-in-the-act guilty, Evelyn thought. But in an “oh shit, this looks bad” guilty. Evelyn’s heart clenched.

She wasn't naive. She knew she and Jo weren't in a relationship. They were still figuring things out. But seeing Jo in the middle of an embrace, looking so at home in this world, made something inside Evelyn go cold. She refused to let it show. Instead, she lifted her chin, forced a neutral expression onto her face, and walked toward the bar like she had every right to be there. She slid onto a barstool, setting her purse down beside her. "Cosmopolitan, please," she said to the bartender, keeping her voice even.

Jo stepped forward immediately. "Evelyn—"

Slowly, Evelyn turned her head, arching an eyebrow. "Oh," she said, smoother than she thought possible. "Hey, Jo."

After a beat of hesitation, clearly thrown by her calm tone, Jo gave her a small smile. "Hey," she said. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Taking her drink from the bartender, Evelyn stirred the little straw. "Yeah, well," she said, lifting the glass to her lips. "I needed a break from working so late." She felt Jo watching her, as if she were waiting for something. Maybe an accusation, a confrontation even, but Evelyn wasn't going to give her that. She wasn't going to demand an explanation. If Jo had one, she could offer it on her own.

Exhaling slowly, Jo shifted her weight. "Okay, look," she said. "This—" She gestured toward the woman beside her, who had moved away slightly, no doubt sensing something was off. "This is Carly. An old friend from college."

Carly gave a small wave, offering an awkward smile. "Hi."

Evelyn nodded politely, sizing the woman up. Attractive, she thought. A little on the tomboy side for Jo's taste I would have thought. "Nice to meet you," she finally said, and Jo continued.

“If you sent me something, I didn’t get your text,” she explained. “My phone’s dead. I don’t know when it happened, but Jess is charging it behind the bar.” She motioned toward the counter where her phone sat plugged in. “I wasn’t ignoring you.” Taking another sip of her drink, Evelyn let that sink in and made no comment. Jo sighed. “Carly moved back to Portland. We ran into each other just now and caught up for a bit. That’s all.”

Facing Jo, Evelyn studied her carefully. Jo’s voice was steady, her expression open. She wasn’t flustered and wasn’t scrambling for excuses. She was telling the truth, and Evelyn believed her. Yet, that cold feeling didn’t go away, because the reality was, she hadn’t realized until tonight how much she didn’t know Jo. Not fully, she thought. Not yet. Jo leaned in slightly, lowering her voice so only Evelyn could hear. “I missed you,” she admitted, her brown eyes searching Evelyn’s face. “I was hoping to see you tonight. Somehow.”

Something in Evelyn softened, but she forced herself to stay steady. The truth of the situation had finally come to her, and she knew whatever was happening between them was moving too fast. She set her drink down, exhaling slowly. “Jo,” she said carefully, and Jo straightened.

“Yeah?”

Hesitating for a moment, Evelyn saw the hope in Jo’s eyes, the way she waited for Evelyn to say something as if to make everything okay. But Evelyn wasn’t sure she could do that, or at least not tonight. “I think I’m gonna head home,” she finally said.

Blinking with surprise, Jo clearly was not expecting that answer. “Oh,” she said. “Okay.” The woman hesitated for only a second before stepping closer and dropping her voice. “Do you want me to come with you?”

Evelyn’s stomach flipped, but she shook her head. “No,” she said gently. “Not

tonight.”

Jo’s expression flickered with something. Frustration? Evelyn wondered. Or disappointment? Still, she didn’t push.

Instead, Jo nodded slowly. “All right,” she said. “I’ll call you a little later?”

“Yeah,” Evelyn said with a small smile. “I’d like that.” She slid off the barstool, grabbed her purse to get money to pay.

Clearly recognizing what Evelyn was doing, Jo waved her off. “I got it,” she said. “My way to say sorry for the confusion.”

Biting her lip, Evelyn hesitated before nodding. “Thank you,” she said and turned to leave. As she walked away, she felt Jo’s eyes on her, and although it took all her strength, she didn’t turn back.

Exhaling slowly, Jo stared at the spot where Evelyn had sat a moment ago. She left, Jo thought. She actually walked out and left me standing here. Jo wasn’t sure why that fact rattled her so much. It wasn’t like Evelyn had stormed out or made a scene. She had been calm, polite. Too polite. Somehow, that was worse because Jo knew when someone was putting up a wall, and Evelyn just locked herself behind one. “Shit,” Jo muttered, rubbing a hand over her face.

Beside her, Carly let out a low whistle. “Well, that didn’t go great,” she said, and Jo shot her a look.

“Thanks for the insight.”

Carly held up her hands. “Hey, I didn’t mean to cause problems,” she said. “I didn’t realize you were involved with someone.”

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Taking a deep breath, Jo shook her head. “We’re not—” She stopped. What are we? Involved? Definitely more than friends, she thought before exhaling. “It’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always?” Carly said with a snort, but Jo didn’t answer. She was too busy replaying the look on Evelyn’s face. That perfectly neutral expression. I’m pretty sure she believed me, she thought. But it wasn’t enough to keep her there. It was a gut punch in a way Jo wasn’t used to.

A familiar voice cut through her thoughts. “Well,” Mica said, stepping up beside her with a smug look. “That was painful to watch.”

Clenching her jaw, she turned to her friend. “Yeah?” she said with a hiss.

“I mean,” Mica continued, clearly enjoying herself. “That was textbook bad timing. I could practically hear the sad trombone sound effect.”

Jo gave her a glare. “That’s not helping.”

Mica snorted, taking a sip of her drink. “Oh, come on,” she said. “It’s a little funny.”

“It’s not funny,” Jo snapped.

“Jo, chill out,” Mica said. “Just text her in the morning, explain again, and—”

Narrowing her eyes, Jo glared at Mica. “I don’t need you telling me what to do,” Jo growled, and Mica blinked, clearly surprised by Jo’s tone. Taking a deep breath and

closing her eyes, Jo tried to steady herself, but the frustration was boiling over. The teasing, the way the night had gone completely sideways, the way Evelyn had walked away like Jo wasn't worth the effort, hit her all at once. "You know what?" Jo's voice was slow and tight. "If you can't drop it, maybe you should find another job."

For a beat, Mica didn't say a word. "Whoa," she said softly, and even Carly looked taken aback. Jo immediately regretted being so harsh. The words had come out too fast. Mica was her friend, and she loved working together, but she could be as annoying as hell, and Jo didn't want to hear it. Mica studied her for a beat, then shook her head. "You're pissed because you actually care about this one," she said. "And that's freaking you out."

Jo didn't answer because Mica wasn't wrong, and after a long pause, Jo exhaled. "I'm sorry," she said, meeting Mica's eyes. "That was shitty of me."

Sipping her drink, Mica nodded. "Yeah, it was," she said, and Jo let out a short laugh.

"You gonna make me grovel?"

"Nah. I'll let it slide this time," Mica replied with a grin. "But only because I know you're in emotional distress."

Jo snorted a laugh and felt the tension ease slightly. "Thanks," she said, and Mica bumped her shoulder.

"You're welcome."

Shaking her head, Jo managed to smile as Jess called over from the bar. "Your phone's got some charge now."

"Thanks," Jo said, taking her phone. Turning it on, she watched the screen flicker to

life. One notification. A missed text from Evelyn. Jo's chest tightened, but she hesitated for only a second before opening a new message. "I miss you," Jo wrote. "I'm sorry about the misunderstanding. Can we talk?" She hovered her thumb over the send button, but before she could press it, her phone rang. It was local, but an unfamiliar number. Frowning, she answered. "Hello?"

"Is this Jo Fuller?" a deep, authoritative voice said.

Jo's stomach dropped. "Yeah," she answered.

"This is Officer Reynolds with the Portland Police Department." Jo's grip on the phone tightened. "We're calling because your auto shop was broken into tonight."

Fourteen

Evelyn hadn't slept much. She had tossed and turned all night, staring at the ceiling, staring at her phone, willing it to light up with a message from Jo. But it never did, and that, more than anything, made her stomach sink. She had told herself she wasn't going to overthink it. That she and Jo weren't serious yet, that they were still figuring things out, but the truth was, she had wanted Jo to call. In a tiny part of her, she had expected it even. The fact that Jo hadn't bothered to call her told Evelyn everything she needed to know. She had been right to put on the brakes last night.

Jo was still the player Jasmine painted her to be. Likely a woman who had spent years charming her way through casual flings, never staying in one place for too long. Evelyn had let herself believe, for a moment, that maybe she made it different. That maybe Jo wanted more with Evelyn, but lying in bed with a dull ache in her chest, Evelyn felt like a fool for thinking that. With a sigh, she rolled over and checked the time. 6:42 A.M.

She groaned. Even though it was Saturday, she had to go to work today. She had

deadlines, research to finalize, and a board presentation to prepare for, but she had no energy for it. Dragging herself out of bed, she shuffled into the kitchen, making herself a cup of coffee. Standing by the window as she sipped it, she watched the early morning light filter through the trees outside. Her thoughts drifted once again to Jo. Did she still stay at the bar after I left? she wondered. Did she go home with someone else? Evelyn clenched her jaw, hating that she even cared. She needed to talk to someone.

Before she could second guess herself, she grabbed her phone and called her sister, Jasmine. The phone rang twice before her sister picked up, sounding groggy. “Evie?” Jasmine’s voice came over the speaker on Evelyn’s phone. “It’s barely seven. Are you dying?”

Evelyn let out a weak laugh. “No,” she said. “I just needed to talk.”

There was a pause, then the sound of rustling sheets as Jasmine sat up. “Okay,” she said, suddenly more alert. “What’s wrong?”

Pressing her fingers to her temple, Evelyn sighed. “It’s Jo.”

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“Oh, boy,” Jasmine said with a groan. “What did she do?”

Closing her eyes, Evelyn hesitated. “Nothing. That’s the problem.”

Jasmine was quiet for a beat. “Start from the beginning.”

Evelyn did. She told her about going to Sapphire, about sort of seeing Jo with another woman, about how Jo had explained everything and how Evelyn had believed her but still hadn’t been able to shake the doubt. “And then,” Evelyn finished. “I went home. And I thought she would at least call me. But she didn’t. Not a text. Not anything.”

“Damn,” Jasmine exhaled.

“Yeah.”

There was a long silence. “Are you sure you’re being fair?” Jasmine finally said, and Evelyn frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Jasmine said. “You said you believed her. You know she wasn’t doing anything wrong. So why are you acting like she betrayed you?” Evelyn opened her mouth, then closed it. Jasmine continued. “You pulled back first, Evie. Clearly, you needed space. Maybe she was respecting that.”

Evelyn shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know...”

“Look, I get it,” Jasmine said with a sigh. “You’ve always been careful about relationships. You don’t trust easily, and that’s fine. But don’t push her away only because you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Evelyn said a little too fast.

Jasmine snorted. “You so are.” Pinching the bridge of her nose, Evelyn groaned. Jasmine’s voice softened. “You like her. And I think she likes you too. So maybe give her a chance before you decide she’s like every other mistake you’ve never actually made.”

“You really think I should call her?” Evelyn said, rubbing her forehead.

“Yes,” Jasmine said firmly. “Before you drive yourself crazy.”

Evelyn paused for a beat and then, finally, she gave in. “Okay,” she murmured.

“Good,” Jasmine said. “Now let me go back to sleep.”

“Fine,” Evelyn said with a laugh. “Thanks, Jasmine.”

“Anytime,” Jasmine said. “Go fix your love life.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and hung up. She stared at her phone for a long moment. Then, before she could lose her nerve, she scrolled to Jo’s name and pressed the icon to call. The phone rang once. Twice. Then... “Evelyn?” Jo’s voice was rough, like she hadn’t slept much either.

Evelyn hesitated. “Hey.”

There was a pause, and then Jo exhaled. “Hey.”

“I wanted to check in,” Evelyn said in a rush. “See how you are doing.” She bit her lip. Jo was quiet for a second.

Then she let out a laugh, but there was no humor in it. “Well,” she said. “You picked a hell of a time to call.”

“What do you mean?” Evelyn asked, her chest tightening with concern. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah,” Jo said with a tired sigh. “But my garage got broken into.”

Evelyn’s stomach dropped. “What?” she asked. “When?”

“Last night,” Jo muttered. “Got a call from the cops right after you left the bar. Someone smashed the front windows, trashed the place. Took some tools, some parts. I spent the whole damn night dealing with police reports.”

“Jo, I’m so sorry.”

Jo let out a slow breath. “Yeah,” she muttered. “Me too.”

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Clutching the phone tighter, all Evelyn's doubts, all her assumptions about last night, suddenly faded into the background. Jo hadn't called her, not because she didn't care, but because her entire world had been shaken. "Jo..." Evelyn said softly, still processing an idea.

"So, yeah," Jo said. "I'm sorry, but that's why I didn't call or text." Even though she knew she still had a lot of work to do at the office, Evelyn decided it could wait a little longer.

She smiled. "Jo," she said. "I'm coming over."

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Jo blinked. "What?"

"I'll be there in thirty minutes," Evelyn said, her voice leaving no room for argument. "I'll make you breakfast. And help however I can."

Closing her eyes for a moment, Jo realized how much she needed to hear that right now. For the past eight hours, she had been running on fumes, trying to push through the exhaustion, the frustration, the violation of someone breaking into her shop. But suddenly, for the first time since it happened, she felt like she wasn't handling it alone. "You don't have to do that," she said softly.

"I know," Evelyn said. "But I want to."

"Thank you," Jo murmured. "See you soon." She hung up, staring at the phone for a beat. Then, finally, she let herself relax a little. Evelyn was coming. Before she even realized what she was doing, Jo pulled out flour, sugar, and eggs. There was time to

wait until Evelyn arrived, so she stuck to her go-to baking. She needed it to calm herself down and help her feel like she had control over something. By the time she was scooping dough onto the baking sheet, the tension in her shoulders had eased a little. Her phone buzzed on the counter.

She wiped her hands on a towel before picking it up to see a text from Mica. “Am I fired?”

Jo snorted. “No, dumbass,” she wrote.

A text came back. “Good. That would have sucked. Sorry for being an insensitive jerk last night.”

Leaning against the counter, Jo sighed and messaged back. “I forgive you.”

“Whew,” Mica sent. “How’s everything with the garage?”

The anxiety Jo had shrugged off slowly came back. “A mess,” she said. “I’ll see you Monday.”

“Yep. Hang in there.”

Jo set the phone down and checked the clock. Evelyn should be here any minute, she thought, a warmth filling her and easing her nerves a little. Then the doorbell rang as if Jo had conjured her out of thin air. She didn’t hesitate, going to the door and pulling it open. Evelyn stood there, her expression even more comforting than Jo had expected.

“Hi,” Evelyn said, and then, without saying a word, without hesitation, Jo stepped forward and pulled Evelyn into her arms. Evelyn let out a small sound of surprise, but then she melted against her, holding her just as tightly. For the first time since last

night, Jo felt like she could finally breathe.

Evelyn stretched her legs out on Jo's couch, feeling the warmth of a delicious breakfast settle into her body. Jo sat beside her, one arm draped lazily over the back of the cushions, her eyes heavy-lidded, her body clearly running on fumes after the long, stressful night. Evelyn nudged her gently. "You need to sleep."

Letting out a soft chuckle, Jo rubbed her eyes. "Yeah, well," she said. "Hard to sleep when your whole world gets trashed in the middle of the night."

Feeling her heart tighten, Evelyn reached over, slipped her fingers through Jo's, and squeezed lightly. "Come on," she said, standing and giving Jo's hand a gentle tug. "Bed. Now."

Raising an eyebrow, Jo smiled despite her obvious exhaustion. "Bossy," she said, and Evelyn rolled her eyes.

"You love it," she said. "Now, come on." Jo laughed but didn't argue. Instead, she let Evelyn pull her toward the bedroom, their hands still linked as they walked down the short hallway. Inside, the room was simple but comfortable. There was a large bed, dark sheets, and a dresser with a few scattered belongings on top.

Jo paused inside the door, suddenly looking shy in a way Evelyn hadn't seen before. "You don't have to stay," Jo said, glancing at her. "I know you have work to do."

Knowing Jo was right, but also knowing what needed to happen next, Evelyn took a deep breath to summon her nerve. I can do this, she thought. I want this. Reaching for the hem of her shirt, Evelyn stepped closer. "I'm staying," she said, and she watched Jo swallow hard as Evelyn pulled off her top, leaving herself in only a soft cotton tank. Jo's gaze darkened slightly, but she didn't move. Evelyn tilted her head. "You planning to sleep in jeans?"

“Point taken,” Jo murmured, and she peeled off her shirt, then her jeans, leaving her in only boxer briefs. Evelyn had seen Jo in plenty of outfits before—grease-streaked work clothes, her signature leather jacket, even the slightly more polished look she had worn to Evelyn’s apartment for dinner. But this was different. Even though she was muscular, Jo looked softer, her usual confidence replaced with something quieter. But no less sexy, she thought. Evelyn swallowed hard. I’m only going to focus on sleep. That is the plan. Sleep. She pulled off her leggings and climbed into bed. Jo hesitated for only a second before following, settling beside her.

The moment Jo’s body pressed against hers, warmth flooded through Evelyn’s body. It was supposed to be comforting, but all it did was remind her how much she wanted Jo. Evelyn exhaled slowly, staring at the ceiling, trying to steady her breathing. Jo shifted beside her, turning onto her side, propping herself up on one elbow. “You okay?” she asked, and Evelyn turned her head, meeting Jo’s gaze in the dim light.

“Yeah,” she whispered, and before Jo could say another word, Evelyn reached for her, pulling her into a kiss that started slow, soft, but quickly became something more. Her heart pounded as Jo’s lips moved against hers, and their bodies pressed tightly together. She felt the heat of Jo’s skin through her thin tank top, the firmness of her muscles, the softness of her curves. Every touch, every movement, sent shivers down her spine, igniting a fire deep within her.

Slowly, Jo’s hands slid down Evelyn’s side, her fingers tracing the hem of her tank top before slipping underneath. Evelyn gasped as Jo’s warm hands found her bare skin, her touch gentle yet confident. She arched into the touch, her body craving more. Jo broke the kiss, her lips trailing down Evelyn’s neck, her teeth grazing lightly against her skin. Evelyn’s breath hitched, and her fingers tangled in Jo’s hair as she held her close. Jo’s mouth moved lower, her tongue brushing Evelyn’s skin, drawing out a soft moan.

“You’re sure you want this?” Jo whispered, and Evelyn nodded.

“Yes,” she said, her voice barely more than a gasp. “I want... I want you to touch me.”

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Jo lifted her head, her eyes dark with desire. “Where do you want me to touch you, Evelyn?” she murmured, her voice rough.

Evelyn’s cheeks flushed, but she held Jo’s gaze. “Everywhere,” she breathed. A slow smile spread across Jo’s face as she shifted her body, covering Evelyn’s. By instinct, Evelyn opened her legs and felt Jo’s weight settle between them, the warmth of her body seeping into her skin. Jo’s lips found Evelyn’s again, her kiss deep and hungry while Evelyn’s hands roamed over Jo’s back, feeling the muscles shift beneath her touch.

Breaking the kiss, Jo paused with her hands under Evelyn’s top, her eyes meeting Evelyn’s. “Can I take this off?” Jo asked, her voice soft. Evelyn nodded, her breath coming in short gasps. Jo’s fingers hooked under the hem of the soft fabric, slowly pulling it over her head. Evelyn’s heart pounded as her breasts lay bare before Jo, her body trembling with anticipation.

As her eyes roamed over Evelyn’s body, hunger filled Jo’s gaze. “You’re beautiful,” she murmured. Evelyn felt her cheeks flush, but she didn’t look away. She watched as Jo’s head dipped, her lips finding Evelyn’s nipple. Evelyn gasped, her back arching as Jo’s tongue swirled around the hardened peak, drawing out a moan from deep within her. Suddenly, Jo’s hands moved to Evelyn’s hips, her fingers slipping into the waistband of her underwear. She looked at Evelyn. “Can I take these off too?” she asked, and Evelyn nodded again as her heart raced. Jo slowly pulled her underwear down and off. Evelyn held her breath as she lay completely naked before Jo. Any hint of doubt or fear that this was what she wanted was gone. All she could think about was Jo and her body, her fingers, her mouth.

Slowly, Jo's attention moved to Evelyn's thighs, and her fingertips traced patterns against her skin. Evelyn's breath hitched as Jo's hands moved higher, her touch gentle yet firm. When Jo's fingers brushed over her center, Evelyn gasped, her hips jerking upwards. "Is this okay?" Jo asked, her voice soft. "Can I touch you here?"

Evelyn nodded. "Yes," she breathed. "Do whatever you want to me."

In response, Jo moved lower, trailing kisses down Evelyn's stomach. Evelyn moaned when Jo's head dipped between her thighs, her tongue finding her most sensitive spot and circling her clit. Evelyn's body arched into the contact, her hips moving in time with Jo's tongue. She felt pleasure building within her, her body coiling tighter and tighter. Slowly, Jo's finger slipped inside her at the same time Jo used her tongue on Evelyn's clit. Evelyn cried out. "Yes, oh my God," she gasped. "Oh my God." Unable to stop herself, she bucked in time with Jo's hand, pressing her clit harder against her mouth. The pleasure was building within her, and she thought for the first time she might actually come. Having an orgasm with a lover was something she had never done, and it excited her to think Jo could draw one out of her.

Suddenly, Jo slipped a second finger inside her, and Evelyn felt herself widen with the added pressure. A long moan of pleasure came from deep within her. "Oh, Jo, that feels so good," she said, and in response, Jo stroked her with long, slow thrusts. Evelyn's entire body quivered, close to the edge, but still not able to tip over. She wasn't sure she could do it, and then Jo sucked Evelyn gently and she came undone. Her orgasm crashed over her, her body throbbing as waves of pleasure coursed through her. She cried out. Jo's fingers continued to move in and out of her, drawing out every last wave of pleasure until Evelyn's body finally stilled.

Jo's head lifted, her eyes meeting Evelyn's. A slow, satisfied smile spread across her face. "That was..." Evelyn breathed, her voice barely more than a whisper. "That was incredible."

“Just the beginning,” Jo murmured, her voice filled with promise. Evelyn’s heart pounded as she reached for Jo, pulling her up and into her arms. She felt the heat of Jo’s body against hers, and as they lay there, wrapped in each other, Evelyn knew that she had never felt more alive.

Fifteen

Taking a deep breath, Jo stood in the center of her garage, arms crossed over her chest, as she took in the damage. The front windows had been boarded over with plywood, but a few jagged edges of glass still clung to the frames. She had swept most of it up already, but there was still work to do. Stepping forward, her boot crunched softly over a missed shard while her gaze swept the room again. There were missing items and specialty tools she used that couldn’t be easily replaced. Some were parts that she had been holding for a customer. Thankfully, it was nothing her insurance wouldn’t cover, but she still felt angry and violated. But not as bad as last night, she thought. And that’s because of Evelyn.

The memory of Evelyn’s body pressed against hers that morning came rushing back. Her soft moans, the way her fingers had clutched at Jo’s back, the way she had said Jo’s name like it meant something. Jo closed her eyes, letting herself sink into the memory for a moment. She hadn’t expected it to feel so intimate. So real. And, God, how she had looked afterward, she thought. Curled up in my bed, hair tousled, lips swollen from kissing...Jo had never wanted to stay in bed all day so badly in her life. But work called to both of them, and they couldn’t afford to ignore it.

Shaking away the thought, Jo turned from the mess and strode toward the far corner of the garage. The tarp-covered shape there was a familiar, silent presence in the shop for the past few years. She hadn’t touched it in months. Too many other things needed her attention, but now, with everything else in disarray, she found herself drawn to it. Saying a small prayer that no damage had been done to it, she gripped the edge of the tarp and gave it a firm tug. The heavy canvas slid free, revealing the

classic curves of a 1966 Ford Mustang Fastback. The paint was faded cherry red, chipped in places, and the body still needed work, but the lines were clean, the bones solid. She stepped closer, running a hand over the hood. The car had been her passion project once. It was something she had picked up cheap from a guy out in Hillsboro who hadn't known what he had. Jo had planned to restore it completely, down to the last bolt, but life got in the way, as it always did.

She crouched beside it. "Still here, huh?" she murmured. "Guess we've both been waiting." In a way, Jo felt the Mustang was a reflection of her. Something old school, a little beat up, needing time and care to be whole again. She hadn't worked on it because, deep down, she hadn't known what she was building it for. Suddenly, she wondered what it would be like to take Evelyn for a ride in it someday, once it was finished. Somehow, she knew Evelyn would like it. Her phone buzzed in her pocket, dragging her out of the moment. She stood, pulling it free and glancing at the screen. Maybe it's Evelyn, she hoped, but instead it was an unknown number. She hesitated, then answered. "Jo Fuller."

"Hello, Ms. Fuller. This is Denise from Westview Commercial Claims. I'm calling about the break-in at your property."

With a sigh, Jo leaned against the side of the Mustang. "Yeah," she said. "Thanks for getting back to me."

"I wanted to update you. There's a bit of a delay in processing," the woman said, her voice polite but cautious. "We're reviewing your policy, and I want to be transparent that there may be some limitations in your coverage." There was a pause, and Jo heard typing on the other end. "It seems your current plan doesn't include full theft protection on certain tools, specialty parts or electronics."

Jo's jaw tightened. "You're kidding."

“I wish I were,” Denise said. “We’ll be sending an adjuster out this week to assess the damage, and we’ll do everything we can, but I wanted to manage expectations early.”

Closing her eyes, Jo pinched the bridge of her nose. “Right,” she said, her stomach already rolling with worry. “Thanks.” The woman offered another polite apology before hanging up, and Jo lowered the phone slowly. She stared at the floor for a long moment, the weight of the news settling on her shoulders. She could handle the repairs. She could fix windows and replace basic tools. But the cost...Jo thought. That is going to sting. Frankly, she wasn’t sure how much more she could juggle. Her phone buzzed again with a text. That time, it was Evelyn.

“Just checking in,” started the message. “I hope the garage isn’t giving you too much trouble. Do you want company later?”

Jo stared at the screen. Do I want company later? she wondered. Back to back nights? That would be unusual for Jo, but the idea of feeling Evelyn’s arms wrapped around sounded good. It was a tough decision. After another beat, she typed back. “Let me think about it. I need to process this.” She hit send and tucked the phone back in her pocket, glancing once more at the old car beside her. She didn’t have all the answers. The insurance might screw her, and the shop would take time to get back on track, yet she didn’t have to face it alone. Evelyn would be there for her if she let her. All Jo had to do was figure out what she wanted.

The building was quiet. Most of the building was empty late on Saturday. The halls were eerily silent except for the distant echo of someone wheeling a cart of supplies down the corridor. Evelyn didn’t mind. She liked the solitude. It gave her space to focus, and focus she had.

Sitting back in her chair, Evelyn stretched her arms over her head with a satisfied sigh. The presentation she had been agonizing over for the past two weeks was finally done. All the data was clean and organized, the charts polished, the wording precise

without being dry. It was the kind of work she was proud of. The kind that made her feel like she was really contributing to something important. But even with the glow of accomplishment settling over her, Evelyn's thoughts drifted elsewhere, and she smiled to herself, biting her bottom lip as her mind replayed the morning with Jo. The heat of Jo's body tangled with hers, the way her voice had gone rough and low when she asked if Evelyn was okay. The way Jo had held her afterward, like it wasn't only about sex. Like it meant something. Evelyn's cheeks flushed, though there was no one around to see it. She still couldn't believe how natural it had felt to wake up in Jo's bed after a short doze, and they had kissed each other goodbye like it was the most ordinary thing in the world. Only it hadn't felt just ordinary, Evelyn thought. It had felt just right.

Reaching for her phone, she suddenly needed to connect with Jo again. Their short text exchange earlier wasn't enough. Jo's "let me think about it" to her offer to come over left a lot of things up in the air. Besides, she deserved a break. The presentation was done, so she had earned that. Tapping Jo's contact, Evelyn waited. Jo picked up on the second ring. "Hey."

Jo did not sound good. "Hi, are you okay?" Evelyn asked, and Jo sighed.

"I'm okay," she said. "I'm trying to figure out how to stretch my shop budget to replace a full set of stolen tools."

"I'm so sorry, Jo," Evelyn said. "Is there anything I can do?"

There was a pause on the line, and Evelyn could practically hear Jo's mind weighing options. "Do you still want to come over?" she finally said. "I mean, at some point. I know you're busy."

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Her heart skipping a beat, Evelyn did not hesitate. “I’ll be there right after I run by my house and grab some clothes,” she said. “Will that work?”

“Yeah,” Jo said, a little more hopefulness in her voice. “Maybe we can eat something delivered?”

“Whatever you want,” Evelyn said, but before Evelyn could say more, the sound of footsteps coming down the hallway made her sit up straighter. A moment later, Dr. Wong appeared at the door to her office, dressed more casually than usual in dark jeans and a tailored blouse, a laptop bag slung over one shoulder. She raised her eyebrows when she spotted Evelyn on the phone. Evelyn lowered her voice. “Sorry, Jo. Dr. Wong just walked in. I’ll see you later.”

“Can’t wait,” Jo said, and Evelyn ended the call.

“Dr. Wong. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I could say the same,” Dr. Wong replied, stepping into the room. “But I’m glad you are. I was hoping to catch you.”

Evelyn gestured to the screen. “I finished the presentation,” she said with pride in her voice. “I was going to send it over in a few minutes.”

Dr. Wong nodded. “Perfect,” she said. “But that’s not why I need to speak to you.”

“Oh?” Evelyn said, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Setting her bag on the table, Dr. Wong leaned against it. “You’ve been doing excellent work, Evelyn,” she said. “Your data on the renewable energy impact models is some of the cleanest analysis I’ve seen in years. I’ve already had two board members ask to talk with you directly after your last draft.”

Evelyn blinked. “Oh. Wow,” she said. “That’s wonderful to hear.”

“It is,” Dr. Wong said with a nod. “Which is why I wanted to discuss something with you before the full team hears about it next week.” She paused, giving Evelyn a measured look. “There’s a position opening up. One I think you’d be perfect for. Something of a promotion.”

“A promotion?” Evelyn repeated after a beat, not quite processing the woman’s words.

“Yes,” Dr. Wong said. “It’s a collaborative research lead position for our coastal sustainability initiative. You would be heading up a pilot program with the Department of Environmental Management and a few partner universities. It’s high profile. Great funding. You’d be leading your own team.”

Barely containing her excitement, but also a little disbelieving, Evelyn shook her head. “That sounds incredible,” she said, and Dr. Wong gave her a rare smile.

“It is,” she agreed. “Although it does come with a few logistical challenges.”

“Challenges?”

“You’d be traveling extensively,” Dr. Wong said. “The position requires on-site evaluations, stakeholder meetings, and fieldwork across the greater Pacific Northwest. You would still be based out of Portland, but you’d be moving between Oregon, Washington, Northern California, and even some time in British Columbia.

At least four to five months of travel, possibly more.” Evelyn felt the air leave her lungs as Dr. Wong continued, clearly unaware of the sudden swirl of emotion in Evelyn’s chest. “I know it’s a lot. But you’ve proven yourself capable. And I think you’d thrive in this role.”

Nodding slowly, Evelyn’s mind spun. It was everything she had worked for. Everything she had told herself she wanted. A chance to lead, to make a real impact, to be taken seriously in her field. Yet, all she could think about was Jo. Her warm hands and the way she kissed her like she was something precious. But four to five months travel, she thought. Maybe more. “I... I need to think about it,” Evelyn said, her voice quieter now.

Dr. Wong picked up her bag, looking unsurprised. “Of course,” she said. “Take a few days. But I’ll need your answer by Wednesday.”

A knock at the garage’s side door made Jo frown. She was still in the middle of inventorying everything that was stolen before heading home, and didn’t expect any visitors. Setting the clipboard on the workbench, she moved to see who it was when the door swung open. Mr. Diaz stepped in, a paper bag in one hand. He paused, his eyes scanning the room.

“Well,” he said, his voice warm, familiar, and a little gruff. “Place looks like hell.”

Appreciating the man’s candor, Jo let out a breath of a laugh. “Yeah,” she said. “You should’ve seen it last night.”

“I could have,” he said, walking farther in. “Officer Reynolds called me. Figured I’d let you handle it though, but I wanted to stop by today. See it for myself.” Nodding, Jo watched as Mr. Diaz surveyed the damage. His gaze lingered on the missing front windows, the empty spaces where tools used to hang, the scuff marks on the floor near the register. “Did they get much money?”

“No,” Jo said, thankful for that fact at least. “I don’t keep much cash here. It’s all credit cards and Venmo payments nowadays.”

“That’s good,” Mr. Diaz said with a nod.

Jo sighed. “I’m sorry you had to see it like this,” she said quietly, and Mr. Diaz turned, his sharp eyes softening.

“Don’t be,” he said. “This place is still standing. That’s what matters.” Jo nodded, but the weight of it all still pressed heavily on her shoulders. Her mentor stepped closer, setting the paper bag down on the workbench. “I brought you some of Rosa’s empanadas. Figured you hadn’t eaten.”

Touched despite herself, Jo smiled. “Thanks.” She reached for the bag and peeked inside. The smell of warm pastry and seasoned meat immediately made her stomach growl. There was plenty, and for a moment, she thought of Evelyn. The empanadas would make a perfect dinner.

“Well, now, would you look at that,” she heard Mr. Diaz say. Jo followed his line of sight to the Mustang. The tarp still lay on the floor beside it, the car exposed in all its half-finished glory. “You finally pulled her out again.” He stepped toward it with a slow, appreciative nod. “You planning to put some work into her?”

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“I might,” Jo answered, walking closer. “Mostly I was checking to see if she was damaged.”

Mr. Diaz glanced at her. “I see,” he said, before stepping closer to the car. “She still got the original engine block in there?”

“Mostly,” Jo said. “I swapped out the radiator a while back. Needed something more reliable.”

The man leaned in, resting his hand gently on the hood. “She’s got good lines,” he said. “You chose well.” Looking away, Jo felt the warmth of the words. She didn’t tell him about the insurance call. About the possible limitations or about how she might be stuck covering most of the losses herself. She didn’t want to see disappointment in his eyes. Not when he’d trusted her with this place.

Instead, she cleared her throat. “How’s Rosa?”

“Still putting up with me,” Mr. Diaz said with a huff. “But actually, that’s part of why I came by.” Jo raised an eyebrow but waited for more. “Tomorrow’s my son’s birthday. We’re having a little barbecue at the house. Nothing fancy. Just burgers, potato salad, and a cooler full of beer. Family, a few neighbors. Rosa said to tell you that if you don’t show up, she’s sending me over with a plate of food and a guilt trip.”

Unable to help from smiling, Jo chuckled. “Hard to say no to Rosa.”

“Smart girl.” He paused, then added, “You should bring your new girlfriend.”

Jo blinked. “Evelyn?” she asked, and Mr. Diaz gave her a knowing look.

“Unless there’s another one I don’t know about.”

Jo felt her ears heat. “We’re not...” she started. “I mean, it’s still new.”

Mr. Diaz shrugged. “So what?” she said. “Bring her anyway. Might take your mind off this mess.”

Hesitating, Jo considered the idea of introducing Evelyn to Mr. Diaz’s family. People who had known her since she was a green behind the ears mechanic and still learning how to swap out an alternator. Still, a part of her wanted them to meet Evelyn and see how wonderful she was. “I’ll ask her,” Jo said finally. “If she’s free.”

“Good,” Mr. Diaz said. “We’ll save you both a seat and maybe a slice of cake, if you’re lucky.”

Smiling, the knot in Jo’s chest loosened a little. “Thank you,” she said, and Mr. Diaz gave her a pat on the shoulder. “Anytime. Now, I’d better get home before Rosa starts checking on me.”

After watching them go, Jo turned back to the Mustang, her fingers trailing along the hood once more. Maybe tomorrow will be good, she thought. A break. Maybe even a reminder that not everything has to be fixed immediately.

Sixteen

After zipping the duffel bag closed with a satisfying tug, Evelyn straightened from where she crouched by the bed. She scanned the room, mentally checking off her list. Toothbrush, pajamas, clean clothes for tomorrow, laptop, in case Jo fell asleep early and she got the urge to work. She smiled to herself. As if I’m going to get any work

done tonight, she thought. Biting her lip, she hesitated, then crossed to her dresser and opened the top drawer. Fingers trailing over neatly folded cotton underwear, she paused, then dug a little deeper until she found what she was looking for—a lacy black set she bought on a whim months ago and never worn. It was sexy without being trashy, delicate without being impractical. Holding it up, she felt a thrill run through her. Maybe after takeout and kisses, I'll find a way to be brave again. She put the lingerie into the duffle, feeling her cheeks warm at the thought of Jo seeing her in it.

Turning toward the bed, her eyes caught on a colorful paperback half-buried under a research text on her nightstand. She picked it up, flipping it over in her hands. The cover was even more ridiculous than she remembered. There was a shirtless man with rippling abs holding a damsel in a billowing dress. "Savage Temptations" the title proclaimed in bold, looping script. Evelyn snorted under her breath. There was a time not long ago when the book would have been her secret escape. But now? she wondered. Now the idea does nothing for me. She suddenly pictured Jo in her mind. Her strong arms that had held her, the rough calluses of her gentle hands, the way her smile could make Evelyn's heart race faster than any fictional hero ever had. I'm not that woman anymore. I don't want fantasy. I want Jo.

Setting the book aside, she hurried through her apartment and grabbed her watering can from the kitchen counter to fill it. She needed to take care of her plants which she knew she was neglecting a little, spending so much time distracted. Moving to the windowsill where her large collection of foliage lived, she started to carefully give a sip to each one. The little succulent by the window was starting to wilt, its leaves a little soft at the tips. She frowned, adjusting it so it caught more of the afternoon light. "I'm sorry I have been so busy and not saying hello to you enough," she said. "But there's this person..." A warmth filled her. Somehow, she knew the plants understood. Still, the reality that she might be gone for longer stretches made her frown a little. She knew Jasmine would come by and water them while she was traveling, but Evelyn still felt a pang of guilt.

She thought about Dr. Wong's offer and the promotion. It was an incredible opportunity that would launch her career and get her more important projects going forward. Things that could really make a difference in the world. But the travel, she thought. Months away. Sporadic visits home. How will Jo react to that? Evelyn set the watering can down and pressed her palms against the windowsill, staring out at the street below. She wouldn't decide right now, and she wasn't ready to discuss it with Jo, especially since the woman was already dealing with so much. Evelyn couldn't pile her own uncertainty onto Jo's already burdened shoulders. Not tonight. Tonight needed to be about them. About laughing over takeout containers and hopefully feeling Jo's hands on her skin again.

Decision made, Evelyn grabbed her jacket and slung the bags over her shoulder. She double-checked the locks on the windows and turned off the lights. As she stepped into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind her, Evelyn made a resolution. She would tell Jo soon, but not until the moment felt right.

Gunning the throttle, Jo weaved through Portland traffic like it was second nature. The wind slipped under her jacket, cool through the tight T-shirt she wore, but she barely noticed. Her mind wasn't on the road. It was on Evelyn. She should have been tired after dealing with the mess at the garage all day, plus trying not to freak out over the impending bad news from the insurance company. Yet instead, she felt excited because Evelyn was coming over.

Jo shifted gears smoothly, leaning into the curve of the road. Her chest tightened. A sensation that had nothing to do with the ride and everything to do with the memory of Evelyn's smile. The way she looked at Jo like she was more than only a grease-stained mechanic in a leather jacket. Jo had plenty of hookups over the years. Plenty of nights that started with a flirt and ended with a goodbye. But this? she wondered, unable to categorize the feeling. All she knew was that whatever it was with Evelyn, it was different. And it scares the hell out of me.

Exhaling sharply, Jo tried to shake off the unease curling in her gut. It doesn't matter, she thought. Tonight isn't about facing my fears. It is about Evelyn. Especially how my mouth feels on hers every time we kiss. Jo smiled under her helmet, already picturing it.

She wasn't too far from her place when she spotted a car. It was a battered Honda pulled over on the shoulder, hazard lights blinking. As she slowed, she caught sight of the woman standing beside it, her phone pressed to her ear, and her face filled with frustration. In the backseat, she heard a baby crying. Without hesitating, Jo pulled over. Doctors run toward accidents to save lives, mechanics stop in emergencies to fix cars. She killed the engine and swung off the bike, tugging off her helmet as she approached. "Can I help?" she called.

The woman lowered her phone, relief flashing across her face. "Flat tire," she said. "And of course, my husband's out of town, and I can't get roadside assistance on the line. I don't even know if I have a spare."

Jo nodded. "Mind if I take a look?" she asked, keeping her tone easy and reassuring.

"Please," the woman said, stepping aside. Crouching by the back of the car, Jo inspected the tire.

Definitely flat with a nail lodged deep in the tread. "I can change that," she said. "Can I check for a spare?"

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Looking a little more hopeful, the woman nodded. “Yes,” she said. “Whatever you need to do.”

“Sounds good,” Jo said, popping the trunk and pushing a few baby supplies to the side. The spare was tucked under the floor mat, so she grabbed the jack to get started. With a little luck, she could have the tire changed in less than ten minutes. Before she got to work on the tire, she shot a quick text to Evelyn. “Running a little late. Be there soon. Promise.”

Shoving her phone back in her pocket, Jo focused on the task. The woman hovered nearby, bouncing the baby wrapped in a blue blanket gently in her arms. The little guy stared at Jo with wide, curious eyes, and she grinned at him as she tightened the lug nuts. “Hey, buddy,” she said in a low voice. “You supervising?” The baby gurgled, blowing a spit bubble, and Jo chuckled. Standing, Jo wiped her hands with the rag from her back pocket before reaching out and tickling his tiny foot. The baby gave a delighted squeal.

“You’re a natural,” the woman said, smiling.

Returning her smile, Jo shrugged. “There’s some in the family. I can usually get them to smile,” she said. “Seems I have a knack for it.”

“I can see,” the woman said. “Thank you, seriously. You saved my night.”

“No problem,” Jo said, putting away the jack and loading the flat tire into the trunk before slamming it shut. “You’re good to go. Just get that tire patched or replaced soon, okay?”

“I will,” the woman promised.

Jo nodded, pulling her helmet back on. She gave the baby a mock salute, earning another giggle, then swung her leg over the bike. As she pulled away, she hoped Evelyn hadn’t been at Jo’s house for too long. Jo couldn’t wait to see her. After a hell of a long day, she was ready to relax and forget about everything for a while.

Evelyn sat in her car outside Jo’s house, scrolling her phone while she waited. Then she heard it. The low, familiar rumble of Jo’s motorcycle and her heart skipped a beat. A moment later, Jo rounded the corner, and there she was, straddling the sleek black bike, moving with easy, practiced grace. The leather jacket, the dark jeans, the black helmet. Evelyn couldn’t think of anything sexier than knowing it was Jo. Men with chiseled abs and brooding stares on romance covers be damned, a butch in leather on a motorcycle was hot.

As Jo coasted to a stop right outside Evelyn’s car window, her boots planted firmly on the pavement to balance the bike. She pulled off her helmet with a smile that could have melted even the most rigid ice queen. “Well, hello,” Jo said, voice low and teasing. “You stalking me now?”

Rolling down her window, Evelyn smiled at her. “Maybe,” she said, matching Jo’s tone. “You’re hard to resist when you show up looking like that.”

Jo laughed. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” she said, giving Evelyn a wink before revving the engine once, just to show off a little. Evelyn shook her head, biting her lip to keep from grinning too widely. She thought briefly about asking Jo to take her for a ride, but she knew tonight was about relaxing. I will ask for a ride soon, she promised herself. Before anything changes.

“Gimme a minute to park,” Jo said, nodding toward a covered garage. “Meet you at the door?”

“Deal,” Evelyn said, already reaching for her shoulder bag. By the time she climbed out of her car, and unloaded her overnight duffle bag Jo had wheeled the bike carefully into the garage.

As Evelyn crossed the sidewalk, the woman caught up carrying a brown paper sack. “Sorry for the delay,” Jo said, unlocking the door and pushing it open for Evelyn to step inside. “Had a little roadside rescue situation.”

Evelyn turned to face her once they were in the living room, arching an eyebrow. “Rescue?”

“Flat tire,” Jo said with a shrug, taking off her jacket. “Baby involved. Couldn’t leave them stranded.”

Unable to help it, Evelyn’s heart squeezed a little at that. Of course, Jo stopped, she thought. She’s my knight in shining armor. “Then, you’re officially the hottest good Samaritan I’ve ever met,” Evelyn said, setting her bags by the couch.

Smiling, Jo sauntered toward the kitchen. “Speaking of good deeds,” she called over her shoulder as she walked. “I come bearing gifts. Rosa sent me home with a whole bag of empanadas.”

“You’re kidding,” Evelyn said. Her stomach rumbled on cue as she followed Jo into the kitchen.

“Nope,” Jo said, holding up the brown paper sack like it was treasure. “Dinner is served.”

“Oh, that’s perfect.”

“Exactly what we needed,” Jo agreed. “Go ahead and get comfortable on the couch.

I'll be there in a minute after I heat these up in the microwave. You know me, gotta have things gourmet."

Laughing, Evelyn went and plopped onto the couch, kicking her shoes off and tucking her legs under her. After a few minutes, Jo dropped beside her, close enough that their thighs brushed, and started handing out the food. The smell hit Evelyn immediately. Warm pastry, seasoned beef, hints of cumin and garlic. Evelyn sighed happily. "I might be in love with Rosa right now," Evelyn said, cutting into an empanada.

Jo nodded, her mouth already full. "Seriously true," she said after a big swallow. They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes before Jo leaned back against the couch, a second empanada in hand.

She glanced sideways at Evelyn. "Okay," she said, mouth half-full. "Serious question." Raising an eyebrow, Evelyn tried not to overthink whatever Jo would ask.

She wiped her fingers on a napkin. "Shoot," she said, keeping her tone playful.

"Why did you decide to get into environmental research?" Jo asked. "Why not the usual lawyer, doctor, some other super smart person job?"

Feeling her cheeks warm a little at Jo's flattering comments, Evelyn took another bite as she hesitated. "I like to find solutions," she said after a moment, a little more serious. "Of course, you know I love everything about nature. On every level." She shrugged. "It made sense to use my skills to find ways to protect it."

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Jo watched her for a beat, something soft flickering in her eyes that Evelyn couldn't quite read. "Makes sense to me," she finally said with a smile, the playfulness coming back. "I think if anyone can save the planet, it's you."

Evelyn smiled, heart flipping over. "What about you?" she asked, nudging Jo's knee with hers. "How did you go from almost-accountant to badass mechanic?"

"There's not much to the story," Jo said with a shrug. "My parents are both CPAs and pushed me toward it. They thought I should have a good, stable job. Something with a salary, benefits, and a 401(k). Exactly like they did." She snorted a laugh. "Turns out I'd rather get grease under my nails and fix things with my hands."

"You do it well," Evelyn said softly.

Setting aside her empty plate, Jo turned her head, putting their faces much closer. "Yeah?" she asked, voice dropping.

"Yeah," Evelyn whispered. For a beat, neither of them moved.

Then Jo took Evelyn's empty plate and set it down carefully, before leaning in. "Come here," she murmured, and Evelyn did without hesitation, their lips meeting in a kiss. Jo's hand slid into Evelyn's hair, tilting her head to kiss her harder, and Evelyn moaned softly against her mouth. Jo pulled back, her eyes darkened. "Did you plan to sleep on the couch tonight?"

Feeling her body responding to Jo in every way, Evelyn shook her head. "No," she replied. "I wasn't planning to."

With a low growl of approval, Jo scooped her up effortlessly, making Evelyn squeal and laugh as she wrapped her arms around Jo's neck. "You're always the hero," Evelyn said, smiling.

"Yep," Jo said, carrying her toward the bedroom. "And you love it." Evelyn didn't argue.

Seventeen

Standing in the doorway of her bedroom, Jo held a coffee mug. Evelyn was still curled under the covers of Jo's bed, her blonde hair a soft tumble across the pillow, one arm flung lazily over her head. Jo couldn't help but smile. She looked almost too perfect to disturb, but she knew that they had things to do today, so she cleared her throat softly and stepped forward. "Evelyn," she said, her voice gentle. "I brought you something."

Evelyn stirred, blinking her eyes open as she rolled toward the sound. When she saw Jo standing there, her face lit up with a sleepy smile. "Good morning," she murmured, voice still husky from sleep. "Is that for me?"

Jo nodded and held out the mug. "It's a latte. Sort of. I tried to make it like the one you ordered the other day," she said. "I mean, I don't have oat milk or a real milk frother, but..." She shrugged as Evelyn sat, pulling the sheet with her, and took the mug carefully.

"Thank you," Evelyn said. She took a sip, then paused, her eyes widening slightly. "Jo. This is actually really good."

"Really?" Jo said, more than a little surprised.

Nodding, Evelyn smiled behind the rim of the mug. "You could've fooled me," she

said. “And I thought you only knew how to make black coffee that could melt steel.”

“Hey, I’m full of surprises,” Jo said with a grin.

Taking another sip, Evelyn leaned her back against the headboard, the mug cradled in her hands. “Mmm. I needed this,” she said. “I’m exhausted.”

With a wide smile, Jo tilted her head. “Gee, I wonder why.”

Evelyn blushed. “Is that what you think?”

“Don’t you?”

Turning even pinker, Evelyn hid her face behind the mug for a moment, then laughed. “I do think so.”

Crossing her arms, Jo leaned against the doorframe. “Funny, but you didn’t seem tired last night,” she said, voice low and teasing.

Meeting her gaze, Evelyn raised an eyebrow. “Neither did you.”

Jo chuckled, and for a moment the room was filled with a comfortable, easy silence. She watched Evelyn sip her latte and felt a sort of happiness that she wasn’t used to, but she realized she really liked it.

Suddenly, the words were on her tongue before she could think herself out of it. “So, uh,” Jo started, trying to sound casual. “I was wondering if you might want to come with me to something today.”

“Oh?” Evelyn said, looking up from her latte.

“It’s nothing big,” Jo said, rubbing the back of her neck. “Just a little barbecue. Mr. Diaz is throwing it for his son’s birthday. Rosa’s cooking. There’ll be burgers, beer, probably too much potato salad.”

“Mr. Diaz?” Evelyn asked. “The man I met at your garage?”

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“Yes,” Jo said, shifting her weight. “He invited me yesterday. Said I should bring you, actually. But no pressure or anything.” Quiet for a beat, Evelyn’s expression was unreadable. Jo nodded slowly. “You don’t have to decide now. I know it’s last minute. And you’ve probably got work stuff or whatever. It’s totally fine if you’d rather not.”

Evelyn gave her a small smile, but it didn’t hide the hint of anxiety in her eyes. “Maybe,” she said gently. “Let me think about it?”

Frustrated that she had made things suddenly awkward, Jo forced a smile in return. “Sure,” she said. “Of course.” She pushed off the doorframe, trying not to let the disappointment show. “I’m gonna go start a batch of cookies for it. Rosa always expects me to bring something sweet.” As she turned and walked toward the kitchen, Jo tried to shake it off. Evelyn didn’t say no. She only needs time, she thought. That’s all. Still, something about the hesitation made Jo’s chest tighten.

Back in the kitchen, she moved on autopilot, pulling out flour, sugar, and chocolate chips. The familiar rhythm of baking grounded her again. Measuring, mixing, folding. She didn’t let herself think about the insurance claim or the missing tools or the lingering violation of someone forcing their way into her space. She didn’t think about Evelyn’s maybe. She simply focused on the cookies. When she was ready to scoop the dough onto the tray, she heard footsteps behind her. Then soft arms slid around her waist from behind, and Jo stilled.

Evelyn pressed a kiss to the space between Jo’s shoulder blades. “I’d be happy to go,” she whispered. Jo turned slowly, her heart thudding. Evelyn stood there in one of Jo’s T-shirts, her eyes warm.

Jo searched her face. “You’re sure?” she asked, and Evelyn nodded.

“I want to meet the people who helped shape you.” She smiled. “And if there’s homemade potato salad, how could I say no?”

Smiling, Jo’s chest loosened with relief. “Well, damn,” she said, reaching to pull Evelyn closer. “You just made my whole day.”

Evelyn smoothed her hands down the front of her dress as Jo pulled the GTO into the Diaz driveway. The house was modest but charming with white siding, flower beds overflowing with bright blooms of early-season perennials, and she got a peek of a long wooden table with a red and white checked tablecloth set up in the backyard. She heard the distant sound of voices and someone laughing as Jo put the car in park and glanced at her. “You okay?”

Taking a deep breath, Evelyn forced a smile. “I’m fine.” Jo raised an eyebrow, and Evelyn sighed. “Okay, I’m mostly fine.”

Jo leaned in, her voice low and warm. “They are going to think you’re great,” she said, and Evelyn gave her a look.

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do,” Jo replied. “Because I do.”

Evelyn’s heart fluttered, but she nodded. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

They got out of the car, Jo balancing a tray of neatly wrapped cookies in one hand while reaching for Evelyn’s with the other. Their fingers laced together easily, and Evelyn held on a little tighter as they walked around the side of the house. The backyard was already buzzing with guests. A few people were gathered around the

grill, where a man who looked suspiciously like a younger Mr. Diaz flipped burgers and laughed with someone holding a beer. Children darted between the adults, chasing each other through the grass. A woman with hair streaked with white and a floral apron stood at a long picnic table, arranging trays of empanadas, potato salad, and corn on the cob. That must be Rosa, Evelyn thought. If I have to make anyone like me, I know it will be her.

As if feeling their eyes on her, Rosa turned when Jo and Evelyn stepped into the yard. Her face lit up. “Jo!” she called, wiping her hands on a towel as she hurried over. “You’re here. And you brought someone.”

“Hi, Rosa,” Jo said with a smile. “This is Evelyn.”

Rosa didn’t hesitate. She pulled Evelyn into a warm hug. “You’re even prettier than my husband described,” Rosa said, pulling back to look at her. “And I can tell you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. Jo needs that.”

Surprised, Evelyn let out a laugh. “Thank you,” she said. “It’s lovely to meet you, Mrs. Diaz.”

Rosa waved a hand. “None of that formal stuff,” she said. “It’s Rosa. Come, come, there’s food, drinks, and a shady spot under the oak tree with your name on it.”

Handing off the tray of cookies, Jo chuckled. “We brought dessert.”

Peeking under the foil, Rosa made an approving sound. “Ah, your famous cookies,” she said. “Good. I was worried I’d have to pretend to like my cousin’s store-bought hojarascas again.”

Jo leaned toward Evelyn as Rosa bustled off toward the food table. “Told you she’d think you were great.”

Evelyn smiled, but her stomach still fluttered with nerves as they walked farther into the yard. People waved at Jo, calling out greetings. Evelyn stayed close, trying not to feel out of place. She was settling into a folding chair next to Jo when Rosa reappeared with two cold bottles of beer.

She handed one to Jo, then turned to Evelyn. “I had no idea what you liked,” she said. “But if it’s not beer, we have other choices. Do you want something else?”

Taking the beer, Evelyn smiled, even though she didn’t care for the taste. “This will be fine,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Rosa said, her eyes twinkling. “Now, do you want to hear a story about our Jo?”

Evelyn blinked before warming up to the idea. “I would.”

Jo groaned. “Rosa—”

“Oh hush, it’s a good one,” Rosa said, settling into the lawn chair across from them. “Now, picture this. Jo, nineteen years old, barely started working at the garage part-time while studying business or marketing or something she didn’t even like.”

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“It was accounting,” Jo muttered.

“Right. Accounting,” Rosa said, nodding dismissively. “Anyway, Mr. Diaz hands her the keys to a 1982 Buick and tells her to move it out of Bay Two. Simple, right? Except Jo, being Jo, decides she’s going to impress everyone by backing it out fast.”

Jo groaned again. “Rosa—”

Rosa waved her off. “Jo puts it in reverse,” Rosa continued, grinning. “Hits the gas, squeals the tires, and BAM—backs it straight into the side of a garbage truck driving by.”

Evelyn choked on a laugh. “No.”

“Oh yes,” Rosa said proudly. “Bent the bumper, not a scratch on the garbage truck, and my husband wouldn’t let Jo go near Bay Two for a week.” She laughed heartily. “She’s lucky it wasn’t a patrol car or something.”

“I was new,” Jo protested, throwing her hands in the air. “And that Buick had a touchy accelerator. I barely pressed it.” Evelyn was laughing at this point, the tension easing from her shoulders. Jo looked a dark shade of pink, but a smile tugged at her lips anyway.

Rosa patted Jo’s knee. “She’s come a long way since then,” she said. “One of the best mechanics around. My husband says she’s a natural when it comes to engines.” Her eyes shined with happiness. “And now she’s got someone smart and pretty by her side? I’d say she’s doing fine.” Evelyn’s cheeks flushed, but she smiled. Rosa

stood, adjusting her apron. “Now relax. We will eat soon. Be sure to save room for cake.”

As Rosa walked away, Jo leaned in, her voice low. “I swear, if she tells the one about the carburetor fire, I’m leaving.”

Evelyn smiled wide, her heart full. “I’m staying for that one,” she said, and as Jo laughed, Evelyn felt like she belonged.

Later, after the sun had dipped low and the backyard twinkle lights were turned on, Jo sat beside Evelyn on the back deck of the Diaz house. Their paper plates were abandoned beside them, and the sounds of laughter and clinking bottles drifted from the yard. Evelyn leaned her shoulder gently against Jo’s. “Your people are great,” she said softly.

Pleased, Jo hummed in agreement. “They are,” she said. “I am lucky I found them.”

Her eyes on the horizon, Evelyn nodded. Jo followed her gaze and saw the last streaks of pink disappear behind the trees. “Yes,” she said. “You seem born for this.”

Jo glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

Turning her head, Evelyn met her gaze. “I mean the garage, Mr. Diaz, Rosa, all of this. It’s not only a job. It’s home.”

Letting the words settle, Jo was surprised at how much they hit her. She swallowed. “Yeah,” she said. “I guess it is.”

Reaching, Evelyn took Jo’s hand. “Thank you,” she said. “For bringing me into it.”

Looking down at their joined hands, Jo’s heart thudded a little harder than she was

used to. “I guess I wanted you to see it,” she said. “All of it. Not just the bar, or the shop, or my kitchen full of cookies.”

“The cookies are a strong selling point,” Evelyn said with a laugh.

Smiling, Jo laughed softly, then sobered a little. “I don’t want to freak you out,” she said. “But I never bring women to things like this.”

Her eyes widening a little, Evelyn tilted her head. “Like personal things?” she asked, and Jo nodded.

“Yeah. Like... real things,” Jo said.

Evelyn was quiet for a second, then leaned in and kissed her. It was soft, lingering, less about heat and more about meaning. When she pulled back, her voice was barely above a whisper. “I’m glad you did,” she said. “I feel very honored.”

Wanting to say something more, to tell Evelyn how special she was, Jo opened her mouth, but the words caught in her throat. She settled for holding Evelyn’s hand tighter.

Inside, Rosa called that the cake was being served, and Jo was relieved for the distraction. “Come on,” she said, standing. “It’s Rosa’s famous recipe. We can’t miss that.”

Smiling, Evelyn stood. “Indeed we don’t,” she said. “Lead the way.” As they waded back into the party, fingers still linked, Jo felt something shift inside her. A quiet certainty she hadn’t let herself believe in before. She didn’t know where the road was taking them, but for the first time in her life, she wanted to know someone. Not on the surface, but a person to really open up to and share things. As they entered the busy kitchen, Jo realized she wasn’t scared. As if reading her thoughts, Jo caught Rosa

looking at her while people started to take pieces of cake. After a beat, the woman winked. No one else noticed, and Jo knew Rosa, one of the few people she trusted most in the world, was telling her it was okay.

Eighteen

The café was quiet for a Monday morning, the hum of the espresso machine blending with the soft clink of ceramic mugs and the low murmur of conversation. Evelyn sat at a small corner table by the window, her hands curled around a steaming cup of chamomile tea. She wasn't sure why she'd chosen tea instead of her usual latte. Maybe it's because my stomach is in knots, she thought, happy to see her sister finally enter through the front glass door.

Jasmine slid into the seat across from her, sunglasses pushed to the top of her head, a to-go cup in hand, and a curious look on her face. "Okay," she said, setting her bag down. "You texted me at six-forty-five this morning and said you needed to talk. That's getting to be a habit of yours, but I'm here. What's going on?"

Evelyn exhaled slowly, staring down into her tea. "I got offered a big promotion at work."

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“Wait,” Jasmine said after a beat. “That’s fantastic, right?”

With a sigh, Evelyn nodded. “Yes,” she said. “Dr. Wong pulled me aside Saturday. She said I’d be leading a pilot program. Full funding. A team of my own. It’s everything I’ve been working toward.”

Jasmine’s face lit up. “Evie, that’s amazing,” she said with excitement. “Congratulations.” Evelyn didn’t smile, and Jasmine’s expression faltered. “Okay... now why do you look like someone told you your favorite plant died?”

Shaking her head, Evelyn met her sister’s eyes. “Because it’s not that simple,” she said. “In fact, it complicates everything.”

Watching her, Jasmine sipped her coffee. “Okay,” she said. “What’s the complication?”

“I’d be traveling all over the Pacific Northwest,” Evelyn whispered. “At least temporarily. Oregon, Washington, Northern California, and even parts of Canada. Four to five months minimum. Maybe more.”

Leaning back in her seat, Jasmine nodded slowly. “Wow,” she said. “That is a lot.”

“Yeah,” Evelyn said. They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of the unspoken pressing between them.

Finally, Jasmine tilted her head. “Does Jo know?” she asked, and Evelyn’s shoulders tensed.

“No,” she said. “Not yet.”

“And how long have you known about this?” Jasmine asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Since Saturday,” Evelyn answered. “When I was at the office finishing up a presentation.” When her sister simply looked at her, Evelyn bit her lip. “Okay. I know what you’re thinking, but I didn’t want to ruin the weekend.” Evelyn fiddled with the rim of her cup. “Things were really good. We went to a barbecue with a family she’s close to, we—” She paused, her cheeks flushing. “We had amazing sex, she thought. Multiple times.” “Let’s just say we’re in a good place.”

Jasmine let out a long sigh. “So you’re avoiding telling her something that will absolutely affect your relationship because things are good?” Evelyn looked away. “Evelyn,” Jasmine said, her voice soft but firm. “You do this. Every time something gets serious, you find a way to sidestep it. You bury yourself in work or take the opportunity that lets you run.”

“That’s not fair. This is different,” Evelyn said, though she didn’t even sound convincing to herself.

“I’m not judging,” Jasmine said. “I’m only saying you’ve spent your whole adult life waiting for someone who makes you feel safe enough to stay. And now I think you’ve found that person.” She reached and gently took hold of Evelyn’s arm until she looked at her. “You’ve got someone who makes you laugh, who makes you those ridiculous cookies you won’t stop texting me about—”

“They’re really good,” Evelyn muttered.

“—and you’re about to throw it away because you’re scared.”

Evelyn’s throat tightened. “I’m not trying to throw anything away,” she said. “Like I

said, it's complicated."

"Then talk to her," Jasmine said, letting go and leaning back. "Be honest. Tell her about the job. Tell her how you feel. Give her the chance to tell you the same."

Feeling a knot of anxiety tightening in her stomach, Evelyn was quiet for a long moment. "What if she doesn't?" she finally said. "What if I'm all wrong about this?"

"Then at least you'll know," Jasmine said. "But you can't pretend this decision doesn't affect her."

Nodding slowly, Evelyn's mind raced to consider all the possibilities. "I know," she said after a beat. Her phone buzzed on the table. She glanced at it and her breath caught. It was Jo.

"You left your scarf in the GTO. Smells like your shampoo. Want me to drop it off later?" There was a winking emoji after it. Evelyn stared at the message for a long time, her heart aching in the way it only did when something mattered more than she was ready to admit.

"Is that her?" Jasmine asked, and Evelyn nodded. "What'd she say?" Smiling faintly, Evelyn turned the screen around to let Jasmine read the message.

After a moment, Jasmine looked at her, and her expression was softer. "I'm pretty sure she feels the same, Evie," she said, and Evelyn didn't deny it.

She looked at the phone again, and whispered to herself as much as her sister, "Yeah. I think you may be right." Evelyn stared at the message from Jo, her heart still thudding against her ribs. She could practically hear Jo's voice in those words. Teasing, affectionate, and casual in that way that masked how much she actually cared.

Evelyn hesitated for a beat longer before she finally typed her reply. “You can keep it for now. Consider it collateral. But yes, I’d love to see you later.” She hit send and watched the message disappear, her stomach fluttering with something warm and uncertain.

Jasmine gave her a knowing look. “That was a very flirty yes, wasn’t it?”

Trying not to smile, Evelyn failed. “I can’t help it,” she said softly. “She brings it out of me.”

Leaning back in her chair, Jasmine folded her arms. “So what’s the plan?” she asked, and Evelyn sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’m going to tell her tonight.”

“About the job?” Jasmine asked.

Nodding, Evelyn felt her shoulders relax a little now that she had decided. “She deserves to know the entire situation,” she said. “Even if it complicates things.”

Standing at the front desk of the garage, Jo scribbled numbers on a notepad while Mica leaned against the counter. “You’ve been squinting at that same stack of invoices for twenty minutes,” she said. “You solving a mystery or just hoping the numbers rearrange themselves into something less depressing?”

Jo didn’t look up. “I’m hoping they start lying to me.”

“No such luck, huh?” Mica asked, and Jo grunted in response, flipping the page. Her eyes burned from staring at spreadsheets all morning. Inventory lists, replacement costs, vendor estimates. She already knew the answer, but some part of her kept hoping she had missed something. That there was a line item she overlooked that would magically make the math work. There wasn’t.

There was a knock on the open door of the garage bay, and Jo looked to see a tall man in a blazer that screamed “corporate casual” step inside. He carried a tablet case under one arm. “Jo Fuller?” he asked, scanning the room like she might be hiding behind the tire racks.

“That’s me,” Jo said, straightening to make her location known. “Are you from the insurance company?”

“Yes. Albert Withers, Westview Commercial,” he said with a nod. “I’m here to assess the damage and review your claim.”

Closing the distance between them, Jo gestured toward the garage and all that was in it. “Thanks for coming,” she said. “Right this way.” As they walked across the main bay, Albert tapped notes into his tablet, pausing occasionally to squint at the busted window or the empty hooks where her most expensive tools used to hang. Jo kept her arms crossed, resisting the urge to hover. When they reached the office, she motioned him inside. The space was small but tidy, or it had been before she stacked it with boxes of paperwork and receipts from the last forty-eight hours. She cleared two chairs, and they sat across from each other, the desk between them.

Albert adjusted his glasses and pulled up her file. “Okay,” he began, “I’ve reviewed your policy in detail, and I want to walk you through what’s covered.” He cleared his throat. “And what isn’t.” Jo’s stomach clenched, but she kept her mouth shut and listened. Licking his lips, the man continued, tapping the tablet’s screen with a stylus. “Your general liability coverage is solid. That’ll take care of the broken window, the front door damage, and any structural repairs. But as for the stolen items...” He tapped a few more times, then looked at her. “Unfortunately, your current plan excludes theft coverage for non-fixed assets valued over five thousand dollars unless they were individually listed.”

Jo blinked. “Wait,” she said. “What?”

“Specialty tools, diagnostic equipment, aftermarket parts,” Albert explained. “Anything portable and over the coverage threshold needed to be itemized and separately insured. It’s a pretty common exclusion in small business plans.”

Feeling frustration starting to build, Jo’s jaw tightened. “Let me get this straight,” she said, working to keep her voice even. “You’re telling me I’ve been paying for insurance all this time, and it doesn’t cover half the stuff they took?”

Closing his tablet, Albert gave her a sympathetic smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "It's less than ideal, I know," he answered. "But yes, that is the case."

"No, it's bullshit," Jo said, her voice sharp. "I thought I was covered. I wasn't trying to cut corners. I picked a plan that was supposed to protect this place."

"I understand your frustration," Albert said smoothly, like he'd said it a hundred times before. "But the policy is what it is. I'll submit the report today, and you'll get a formal letter with the final numbers by the end of the week."

Jo stared at him for a long moment, then nodded stiffly. "Great," she said through clenched teeth. "Thanks."

Albert stood, offering his hand. "Best of luck, Ms. Fuller," he said, but Jo didn't take it. After an awkward moment, he turned and left. Jo watched him walk out the door, then leaned back in her chair, rubbing both hands over her face. The silence in the office pressed in on her like a weight. She sat there for a few minutes, unmoving, until she heard the soft creak of the door and Mica's voice.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"Bad," was all Jo could think to say. Mica stepped inside and hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "Like 'this sucks' bad or 'I need to sell a kidney' bad?"

Jo let out a bitter laugh. "They're covering the window," she said with a sigh. "A few repairs. That's about it. The tools, the parts, the diagnostic scanner? All gone. Not itemized. Not covered."

Mica whistled. "Damn."

"I'm gonna have to replace it all out of pocket," Jo said, her voice flat. "That's tens of

thousands of dollars.”

“Do you have that kind of cash?” Mica asked, and Jo gave her a look. Mica nodded. “Right. Stupid question.”

“I might have to take out a loan,” Jo muttered, the words tasting like ash in her mouth. “Or dip into the emergency fund. But that was supposed to be for payroll if things ever got tight and probably won’t even cover everything.”

Mica was quiet for a beat. “That sucks, Jo,” she said, taking off her ballcap and rubbing her close-cropped dark hair. “Totally not fair.”

Leaning forward, Jo rested her elbows on the desk. “I just...” she started, having to swallow hard to keep her stomach under control. “I thought I was doing everything right. I’ve been careful. I’ve held onto Mr. Diaz’s legacy. And now I get hit with this, and the insurance guy shrugs like it’s no big deal.”

“Well,” Mica said, “it is a big deal. But you don’t have to be alone in this.” She narrowed her eyes. “Are you going to tell Evelyn?”

With a sigh, Jo hesitated. “Maybe,” she finally said. “But not yet.”

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“Why not?” Mica asked, eyebrow raised.

“Because it’s not her problem,” Jo answered. “And I don’t want to make her feel like she has to fix it. We just got to a good place. I don’t want to dump all this on her.”

Mica gave her a long look. “You know that’s not how relationships work, right?” she said. “You don’t get to pick and choose which parts of your life she gets to see.”

Standing, Jo nodded. “I know,” she said. “But for now, I don’t want to tell anybody.” Then she thought of Mr. Diaz. Especially not him, she thought. Not until I have a solution. She looked hard at Mica. “So don’t breathe a word of this to anyone, got that?”

“I got it,” Mica said, holding up a hand as if in Scout’s Honor. “But I really think you need to reconsider the Evelyn piece at least.”

Jo opened her mouth to argue, but nothing came out. Finally, she nodded. “I’ll tell her,” she said quietly. “Tonight.”

Evelyn’s fingers tapped lightly against the steering wheel as she sat at a red light, her mind spinning with everything Jasmine had said that morning. She is right, she thought. I need to tell Jo. It’s only fair. And hopefully she will totally understand. The job offer was everything Evelyn had worked for. It was innovative, strategic, and career-defining. But it is also complicated. The light turned green, and Evelyn exhaled, turning left and heading toward home. But halfway down the block, her hand shifted on the wheel, and before she could think twice, she was flipping on her signal and pulling into a side street. She wasn’t going home. She was going to

surprise Jo at the garage.

It's better to talk about this somewhere neutral, she thought. Not curled up in bed, not with flour on our hands and cookies in the oven. Dinner. Somewhere public. Comfortable. The decision made her heart race, but she didn't turn around. Fifteen minutes later, she pulled into the small lot beside Fuller's Auto Repair. She adjusted her coat, smoothed her hair, and walked into the first garage bay. The shop was quiet, the heavy scent of oil and rubber lingering in the air. Jo was at the far end of the garage, standing over a car, working on the engine. She was in her element. Grease-smudged, muscles flexing, and a wrench in one hand. Evelyn's heart did a little flip.

After a beat, Jo looked up, clearly surprised, then straightened. "Hi," she said, setting the wrench aside. "What are you doing here?"

Evelyn smiled, stepping closer. "I was kind of in the neighborhood," she said lightly. "And I figured I'd see if you were up for dinner."

"Dinner?" Jo asked, clearly caught off guard.

"Yeah," Evelyn said, suddenly nervous. "Somewhere close by that we can walk to? My treat." Jo studied her for a moment, something unreadable flickering in her eyes. She looks tired, Evelyn thought. Not physically, exactly, but like something is weighing on her.

Still, Jo nodded. "Yeah," she said. "That sounds good."

Feeling a wash of relief, Evelyn smiled. "Great," she said. "Is now a good time? I can wait while you wash up?"

Looking around as if to weigh what still needed to be done, Jo finally nodded. "This is as good a time as any," she said. "I'll be right back." Jo disappeared into the back,

and Evelyn took a seat on the stool near the entrance, her hands folded in her lap. She tried not to overthink it. This is only dinner, she thought. Just a conversation. She felt her shoulders slump as reality settled in. Just telling the woman I'm falling for that I might be gone for weeks or even months at a time.

When Jo returned, she'd changed into a clean black T-shirt and jeans, her hair slightly damp from where she had run water through it. She looked freshly scrubbed but still a little distracted. "Ready?" she asked, and Evelyn stood.

"Ready."

"There's a diner a few blocks down," she said. "One of my favorites. Good food. Good service. Great pie."

Evelyn smiled and stepped closer. "That sounds perfect," she said, and was relieved when Jo took her hand. "Lead the way." The diner was mostly empty when they arrived, the bell over the door jingling as they stepped inside. Jo led the way to a booth near the window. As they settled in, the waitress came to their table.

She had a pen tucked behind one ear and a name tag that read SHIRLEY. "Hey, Jo," she said. "You haven't been in in a while. What can I get you?"

Smiling a little, Jo looked at the waitress. "Hi, Shirley," she said. "Just been busy." She glanced at Evelyn. "They do great grilled cheese sandwiches and fries here."

Evelyn smiled. "Then grilled cheese sounds great," she said, although the anxiety in her stomach left her with little appetite. "And I'll have an iced tea."

"Make that order a double," Jo said to Shirley, and the waitress winked.

"You got it," she said, before disappearing back toward the counter.

Jo leaned back in the booth with her arms crossed loosely over her chest. “It’s great seeing you,” she said. “And I appreciate you taking me out, but why the surprise?”

Evelyn’s pulse quickened. It was her moment. She felt the words lining up in her throat, ready to spill out. She opened her mouth, but then heard herself saying, “I was missing you. How was your day?” For a moment, Jo simply stared at her, and Evelyn shifted uncomfortably on the seat, thinking the woman knew she was lying.

Then, Jo sighed and looked away. “Well,” she said. “I got the final word from the insurance adjuster today.”

Sensing a problem, Evelyn blinked. “Oh.”

Jo’s mouth tightened. “They’re not covering most of the stuff. The big-ticket tools, the diagnostic scanner, the rare parts I had in storage,” she said, her jaw tight. “I didn’t have them itemized under the right clause. It’s on me.”

Hearing the words, Evelyn’s heart sank. “Jo…”

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“I’ll have to replace everything out of pocket,” Jo continued, her voice flat. “It’s going to wipe out my reserves. And more. I might have to take out a loan.”

Reaching across the table, Evelyn gently touched her hand. “That is such bad news,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

Looking down at their hands, Jo shrugged. “It’s fine,” she said quietly. “It’s just stuff. I can replace it.” But Evelyn heard the weight in her voice.

This isn’t only about tools, she thought. This is about the fear of losing control of something she’s built with her own hands. “I hate that you’re going through this,” Evelyn said, and Jo’s fingers curled slightly around hers.

“I’ll figure it out.”

The food arrived and sandwiches with a mountain of fries were set in front of them. Evelyn was grateful for the distraction, but the words she had come to say sat heavy in her chest. She couldn’t tell Jo now. Not tonight. Not when Jo was already carrying so much. But how can I make Jo feel better about what happened? she wondered as she ate a bite of the sandwich. What can I do to lift her spirits tonight at least? As she chewed, the idea came to her. “Come stay with me at my apartment tonight,” she said. “Maybe a change of scenery for a night will help you relax.”

Nineteen

With the weight of her confession off her chest, Jo started to feel better. Things were still a mess, but there was nothing she could do tonight. The invitation to stay with

Evelyn seemed the perfect solution at the moment. At the apartment building, by the time they reached the third-floor landing, Jo was a little out of breath, but not from the stairs. It was from the sexy view of Evelyn ahead of her. Plus, she was still replaying the way that Evelyn had invited her over again. She had done it so casually, like it was the most natural thing in the world, but there was a hint of heat behind it too. Definitely a good idea, Jo thought. My favorite kind of distraction.

Evelyn unlocked the door and stepped aside, gesturing for Jo to enter first. The apartment was warm and softly lit, the scent of something faintly herbal lingering in the air. Although she was there once before, she wasn't distracted by nerves or Evelyn's lips this time, so she took a moment to really look. Bookshelves lined one wall, filled with books and framed photos. There were plants everywhere. Hanging from the ceiling, perched on the windowsill, curling toward the light. She smiled. Everything was so very Evelyn.

"Give me two minutes to change out of my work clothes, okay?" Evelyn said as she passed her. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Okay," Jo said as Evelyn disappeared into what was likely her bedroom. She wandered toward the kitchen. Everything was like she remembered from their small dinner fiasco, and she smiled thinking of their dancing. Opening the fridge, Jo looked for something cold and stopped. There, on the bottom shelf, was a six-pack of beer. In fact, it was one of Jo's favorite beers. She stared at it for a second, then pulled one out slowly. An IPA from that microbrewery downtown Jo had raved about once, in passing. Evelyn had remembered. Evelyn had bought it. For her.

"Found the beer?" Evelyn's voice came from the doorway, and Jo turned to see her standing in soft gray joggers and a loose T-shirt that dipped just enough at the collar to be innocently, but incredibly sexy.

"I did," Jo said, lifting the bottle. "But you don't like this stuff."

“I don’t,” Evelyn said, walking toward her. “But you do.” Staring at her for a second, Jo was at a loss. No one had ever been so thoughtful.

Finally, she smiled. “You’re gonna ruin me, you know that?” she said, leaving the beer in the fridge and closing the door. Her thirst for it had been replaced with a want for something else.

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. “Is that a complaint?”

Moving closer so they were face-to-face, Jo let her eyes linger on Evelyn’s mouth. “It definitely is,” she said, and watched Evelyn bite her lip as her cheeks flushed a little.

“We should sit down,” she murmured, but didn’t move for a beat.

Ready to savor the moment, Jo nodded. “Okay, let’s sit down.”

They moved to the couch, Jo dropping onto one end while Evelyn curled up beside her. The blanket from the back of the couch slid down between them, and Evelyn casually tossed it over both their laps. Jo felt the warmth of Evelyn’s thigh press against hers and tried not to let her exhale sound like a sigh. It would be so easy to take the next step, and start her usual seduction, but for some reason she hesitated. Not yet, she thought. I want to enjoy this for a little while. I need it after such horrible news today. “Well, you know how my day went, how was yours?” she asked. “Anything new on the environment research front?”

Growing still, Evelyn’s eyes seemed to search Jo’s face, and for a second, she looked ready to say something serious but then smiled. “Oh,” she said. “You know. Just out saving the planet one tree at a time.”

Hesitating, Jo thought about probing deeper. She sensed there was more there, but if she was being honest with herself, she had dealt with enough serious stuff for the

day. I'm going to let that one go, she thought. But I will ask about it tomorrow.

She smiled. "I'm sure you did."

Evelyn hesitated. She looked at Jo's face. Open, handsome, completely unaware of the weight Evelyn was carrying, and she almost said it. But then Jo smiled. That slow, sexy smile that always made Evelyn feel like the most interesting woman in the world, and Evelyn's resolve crumbled. Not tonight, she thought. Because what if this is the last time we cuddle together like this? What if I tell her tomorrow, and everything changes?

Instead of speaking, Evelyn reached for Jo and leaned in to kiss her. It was soft at first, tentative. But when Jo responded, deepening the kiss, Evelyn felt herself give in completely. Her body ached with want, her chest full of everything she hadn't said. She pressed closer, fingers tangling in Jo's shirt. Jo's hands slid to her waist, pulling her in, and Evelyn let any lingering thoughts go. Instead, she kissed Jo like it was the only thing that mattered and relished the heat. Suddenly, her entire body was alive, and as Jo's hands started moving over her, Evelyn knew what she wanted. "Let's go to the bedroom," she murmured against Jo's lips.

Pushing the blanket back, Jo nodded and followed Evelyn. For a moment, a hint of shyness tried to sneak in, but Evelyn pushed it away, pulling off her top and leaving her breasts naked. Jo watched her, and Evelyn saw the hunger in the woman's eyes. Heat pulsed between Evelyn's legs, and she ran her hands over her hard nipples. "Come here," she whispered, as she slid onto the bed, and Jo followed without a word. Only a moment later, Evelyn felt Jo's mouth on her breast, sucking, teasing and all she could do was moan with pleasure. Yes, she thought. This is the right thing. And if this is the last time, I know what I want. Running her hands into Jo's hair, she pulled the woman back gently until they looked into each other's eyes. "Jo, I have something I want to try."

“All right,” Jo replied, her eyes dark with desire.

Taking a deep breath, Evelyn forced herself to say the words, “I have a vibrator in the drawer, and I want to try it.”

Jo blinked, but then a slow smile crossed her face. “Okay,” she said, sliding off the bed in one fluid motion. She quickly pulled off her T-shirt, jeans, and boxer briefs until she was naked. “Which drawer?”

Pushing her own pants down, Evelyn nodded toward the nightstand. “Bottom one,” she said, as she felt air caress her soaked lower lips. Instinctively, she widened her legs and watched as Jo opened the drawer. Evelyn’s heart pounded with a mix of anticipation and nervousness. When Jo turned back to her, holding the sleek, hot pink vibrator, Evelyn’s breath caught. She had never done anything like this with anyone before, only fantasized about it when she touched herself. But she trusted Jo completely. “Is this what you had in mind?” Jo asked, her voice husky as she held up the vibrator.

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Evelyn bit her lip and nodded, her cheeks flushing with desire. “Yes,” she whispered. “I want you to use that on me.” Jo climbed back onto the bed, her body pressing against Evelyn’s as she kissed her. Evelyn moaned into it when Jo took her mouth with her tongue, her body arching against Jo’s, craving more contact. Slowly, Jo trailed kisses down Evelyn’s neck, her collarbone, while she turned on the vibrator, the soft hum filling the room.

Lifting her head, her eyes dark, she paused. “Are you sure?” she asked. All Evelyn could do was nod and her body trembled with anticipation. After a beat, Jo touched the vibrator gently to Evelyn’s clit, making her hips jerk upward and a small cry of excited surprise leave her mouth. The sensation was intense, so much more powerful than when she used it on lonely nights. Jo smiled, her eyes locked onto Evelyn’s face, watching every reaction. Slowly, she moved the vibrator in circular motions, applying exactly the right amount of pressure. Evelyn’s breath came in short, ragged gasps, her body arching into the touch.

Every inch of her body was on fire, and she felt pleasure building within her, coiling tighter and tighter. “Jo,” Evelyn whispered, her voice barely more than a gasp. “I’m so turned on...”

Dipping her head, Jo found Evelyn’s nipple again and she sucked and teased, her tongue flicking against the hardened peak. Evelyn moaned, her fingers tangling in Jo’s hair, holding her close. The combination of sensations was overwhelming, sending waves of desire coursing through her body.

“Jo,” she gasped. “Do more.”

Jo lifted her head, her eyes meeting Evelyn's. "All right," she murmured, her voice rough with need. "Do you want me to fuck you with it?"

With a moan from deep in her throat, Evelyn closed her eyes. "Yes."

Not hesitating, Jo moved the vibrator lower, teasing Evelyn's wet entrance with the tip. Evelyn held her breath, her body tensing in anticipation. Slowly, Jo pushed the vibrator inside until she couldn't take any more. Evelyn gasped, her legs widening, and she grabbed at the bedspread, trying to hang on. The sensation was incredible, the vibrator filling her completely. When Evelyn thought she couldn't feel any more pleasure, Jo slowly pulled it halfway out and then back in until she set a stroking pace that pulsed slow and deep. Evelyn opened her eyes and found Jo's gaze locked onto hers. On instinct, Evelyn's body moved in time with Jo's thrusts, her hips lifting off the bed to meet each one. Like the last time, but much, much stronger, Evelyn thought she might come. Every part of her body coiled tighter and tighter. The sensation of the vibrator inside her, Jo's eyes on hers, seemed more than she could bear, but when Jo ran her thumb gently over Evelyn's clit, it was too much. "Jo," she cried with pleasure. "You're going to make me... I'm going to come..."

Her eyes never leaving Evelyn's, Jo quickened her pace with the vibrator, shifting the tip upward so it grazed a spot in Evelyn she had never experienced before. Oh, my God, Evelyn thought with a pulse of intense pleasure like she had never felt. That's my G-spot. Unable to help herself, she started to whimper and shake.

"That's it," Jo murmured. "Let me see you come for me."

Feeling a final deep thrust of the vibrator, Evelyn couldn't hold back anymore. Her orgasm crashed over her, her body convulsing as waves of pleasure coursed through her. She heard herself scream and knew nothing she had even done to herself could compare to the pulsing she felt. Slowly, Jo continued to move the vibrator inside her, drawing out every last wave until Evelyn's body finally stilled. Evelyn's breath came

in short, ragged gasps as she lay there, her body trembling with the aftershocks of her orgasm.

Jo turned off the vibrator, setting it aside before pulling Evelyn into her arms. “That was...” Evelyn breathed, her voice barely more than a whisper. “That was incredible.”

“You are incredible,” Jo murmured. Evelyn curled against Jo’s side, her head tucked beneath Jo’s chin, her hand resting over Jo’s heart. The rise and fall beneath her palm was steady, grounding. Safe. Her body still hummed, and her skin was tender where Jo’s touch lingered. But I should have told her, she thought. I was supposed to tell her. Still, in her heart, she couldn’t make herself regret it. Not when every part of her ached in the best possible way. Evelyn felt Jo kiss the top of her head. “You okay?”

Evelyn nodded. “Yeah,” she whispered. “I’m okay.” She closed her eyes and let herself pretend, if only for tonight, that everything was simple. That there were no job offers. Only Jo’s arms around her.

The room was quiet. The kind of quiet Jo usually hated after sex, but there in Evelyn’s bed, with her head resting on her shoulder, Jo didn’t mind it. It felt so natural. Like we’ve done this a hundred times before, she thought. And like maybe we will do it a hundred times more. Jo felt something tighten. It was all so new, and she still wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Later. I have enough on my mind tonight.

Staring at the ceiling, her arm wrapped around Evelyn’s back, Jo felt the weight of everything pressing against her. The garage. The break-in. The insurance. The way everything she had worked so hard for teetering on the edge of crumbling. “I’m scared,” Jo said quietly, surprising herself.

Evelyn shifted, lifting her head enough to look at her. “About what?”

Jo hesitated, and then she let out a slow breath. “The shop.”

Sitting up a bit more, Evelyn propped herself on an elbow, her eyes soft. “Tell me,” she said gently. “I want to hear what you’re feeling.”

Continuing to stare at the ceiling for a long beat, Jo finally turned her head to meet Evelyn’s gaze. “I’ve been trying to act like it’s fine,” she said. “Like I’ve got it under control. But I don’t. Not really.” Evelyn didn’t say anything. She waited like she knew Jo needed space to find the words. “I never told you how I got the place.” Jo swallowed hard. “Mr. Diaz, he could’ve sold it to anyone. Real estate developers came sniffing around more than once. But he didn’t want to see it turned into a chain shop. So instead of selling it outright, he offered it to me.” An unexpected burn of tears threatened Jo’s eyes. “Said I could buy it over time. No interest. Just monthly payments, as long as I kept the place running and took care of his customers.”

Her brows lifting slightly, Evelyn rubbed a hand over Jo’s chest. “That’s incredibly generous,” she said, and Jo nodded.

“Yeah. It was,” she said. “And I’ve done everything I could to make good on it. I never missed a payment, and I’ve reinvested every extra dollar back into the shop. I’ve kept it honest, the way he taught me.” Unable to stop it, Jo felt a flash of anger. “But now... after the break-in, after the insurance bullshit, I don’t know. I feel like I’m failing him.”

Reaching out, Evelyn’s fingers brushed Jo’s cheek, and Jo realized she was crying. “Don’t think like that,” Evelyn said. “You’re not failing anyone.”

Jo let out a shaky breath. “I don’t know how I’m going to replace everything,” she said. “I don’t want to ask Mr. Diaz for help. And I sure as hell don’t want to take on some investor who’ll turn it into something it’s not.”

Evelyn was quiet for a moment, her thumb tracing a line along Jo’s jaw. “You don’t have to figure it out alone,” she said. “Don’t carry the load all by yourself.”

Looking at Evelyn, Jo felt something raw flickering inside her. “I’ve never had someone say that to me,” she whispered. “And mean it.”

“I mean it,” Evelyn said, her voice steady. “We’ll come up with something.”

Swallowing back her tears, Jo felt some hope for the first time since the visit from the insurance agent. She let out a soft laugh, but it cracked a little at the edges. “You don’t even like cars,” she said, and Evelyn smiled.

“No, but I like you.”

Twenty

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Evelyn stared at the open spreadsheet of soil quality data on her computer screen, but none of the numbers made sense. It wasn't the information that was the problem. The rows and columns blurred together, her eyes sliding over them without absorbing anything. She blinked, shook her head, and tried again. Still nothing. Her fingers hovered uselessly over the keyboard before she let out a frustrated sigh and slumped back in her chair. She hadn't slept well. Not only because of Jo, but also everything else. The job offer. The deadline to decide. The fact that she still hadn't told Jo, and time was running out. Her phone buzzed on the desk, lighting up with a new text from Jasmine. "So... you told her yet?" Evelyn didn't answer. A second later. "Don't make me come down there and drag it out of you." Evelyn huffed but couldn't stop the small smile that tugged at the corner of her mouth. Another text from her sister arrived. "Seriously, Evie. You promised. You said you'd tell her last night."

Evelyn's stomach twisted. She picked up the phone, gathering her thoughts for a moment, then typed a reply. "I know. I couldn't. Not yet. Last night was so incredibly..." She paused, then erased the last part and left it at, "I couldn't."

"You're running out of time," Jasmine shot back. Evelyn could almost read the frustration in the words as the follow-up text came through. "You said the deadline was Wednesday."

"I know," was all Evelyn could reply. "But I will." Evelyn locked the screen and set the phone face down, pressing her palms against her eyes. She still felt Jo's arms wrapped around her from the night before, the way her voice had gone quiet when she admitted how scared she was about the garage. Evelyn had held her, kissed her, and promised they would figure it out together. And now here I am, she thought. Sitting in my office, keeping a secret that could change everything. A soft knock at the door

made her jump.

Looking, she straightened her posture as Dr. Wong stepped into the room, her expression as unreadable as always. “Evelyn,” she said. “Do you have a minute?”

Nodding, Evelyn forced a small smile. “Of course.”

Dr. Wong stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “I wanted to check in before tomorrow’s deadline,” she said, folding her hands in front of her. “Have you made a decision about the promotion?”

Evelyn swallowed. “I’m still thinking about it,” she answered, and Dr. Wong arched an eyebrow.

“Evelyn, I understand this is a big change,” she said. “But we need a firm answer by tomorrow morning. The board is already moving forward with budget approvals and personnel planning.”

“I know,” Evelyn said quietly. “I need a little more time.”

Titling her head, Dr. Wong studied her. “You’ve worked hard for this,” she said, more gently than Evelyn had ever heard her speak before. “You’re the most qualified candidate. I don’t want to pressure you, but I also don’t want to see you let fear talk you out of something you’ve earned.”

The words landed like a stone in Evelyn’s stomach. Fear? she wondered. Is that really what this is? She opened her mouth to respond, but something inside her twisted sharply. Guilt, maybe, or nerves, or both, and she blurted, “I have a headache.”

“A headache?” Dr. Wong asked. “Now?”

“I’m sorry,” Evelyn said, standing a little too quickly. “I’m not feeling great. I think I need to take the rest of the day off.”

Dr. Wong hesitated, then nodded. “All right,” she said. “But I’ll need your decision first thing tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Evelyn said, already gathering her bag. “Thank you.” She didn’t wait for a reply as she slipped past her boss and out the door, her heart pounding. By the time she made it to the parking lot, she already had her phone in hand, her fingers moving before she could second-guess herself. She pulled Jo’s contact to send her a text. “Are you at the garage this afternoon? I’d love to stop by and see how the brainstorming is going.” The message sent, Evelyn slipped into her car and gripped the steering wheel tightly. She didn’t know what she was going to say. She only knew she needed to see Jo.

Jo was elbow-deep in the guts of a 2004 Subaru Outback, her hands slick with grease and her patience wearing thin. The damn alternator bolt was rusted solid, and she worried she would strip it more if she wasn’t careful. “Come on, you stubborn bastard,” she muttered, bracing her boot against the front bumper as she leaned in and yanked. It didn’t budge.

“Okay, I vote we torch it,” Mica said from the other side of the car, where she was pretending to “supervise” with a half-empty bottle of orange soda in hand. “Or we roll the whole thing into the Willamette and never speak of it again.”

Grunting in response, Jo gave the bolt another tug. Nothing. “God, I hate Subarus,” she said, setting the wrench aside.

“You love Subarus,” Mica said. “You just hate this one.”

Wiping her hands on a rag, Jo leaned back, stretching her arms overhead until her

shoulders cracked. “Well, I’ll get it eventually,” she said. “I can’t afford to turn away business right now.”

Mica grinned. “Any new brilliant ideas on how we’re going to save the shop from financial ruin?” she asked, and Jo snorted a derisive laugh.

“You mean besides selling my organs on the black market?”

“Hey, not a bad idea,” Mica said, before raising a finger like she was revealing a secret. “Or... now hear me out... we stage a heist.” She waved the soda bottle excitedly. Very ‘Fast & FuriousmeetsPortlandia. Steal back your own stuff from the pawn shops.”

Jo snorted a laugh. “You’d be the first one to trip the alarm.”

“Wow. Hurtful.”

At the playful words, Jo shook her head, but the smile was real. They had been tossing around ideas all morning, most of them ridiculous. So far, starting a YouTube channel called Grease & Grit was the best sounding idea, but since they knew nothing about YouTube, it seemed unlikely to work fast enough. Overall, nothing stuck. Nothing felt like it would actually work. Jo’s gaze drifted toward the far corner of the garage, where the Mustang sat under its usual tarp, the cherry-red paint barely visible beneath the folds.

Clearly following her gaze, Mica let out a whistle. “Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

Hating the idea, Jo didn’t answer right away. “It’d go for a lot,” she said finally. “Even unfinished.”

“Yeah,” Mica said. “But it’d hurt.”

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That's an understatement, Jo thought, and nodded. "It would," she said. "I'd be a little heartbroken." They stood in silence for a beat, the weight of that truth hanging between them. Selling the Mustang would be like selling a piece of herself. But the shop needs saving. And if it comes down to it... Before Jo could spiral any further, there were footsteps near the garage door. She turned, and there she was. Evelyn. Dressed in a soft green blouse and dark slacks, her blonde hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, she looked a little out of place amidst the grease-stained chaos of the garage. But Jo's heart lifted at the sight of her anyway. Evelyn's eyes scanned the space until they landed on her, and Jo saw something flicker across her face that she couldn't quite read. Relief? she thought. Or apprehension? "Jo stepped away from the Subaru. "Hi. You're a sight for sore eyes."

Evelyn smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Hi," she said, walking into the garage bay. "I sent you a text. I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Only our wildly unproductive brainstorming session," Mica said, tossing her soda bottle into the recycling bin. "We've come up with approximately zero good ideas and three felonies."

"It's true," Jo said with a little laugh. "You're just in time to save us from ourselves."

Glancing at Mica, Evelyn raised an eyebrow. "Should I ask?"

"No," Jo and Mica said in unison.

Grinning, Mica gave Jo a two-fingered salute. "I'll leave you two to it," she said. "If you need me, I'll be in the office ordering those parts we need."

Once Mica disappeared, Jo turned back to Evelyn, taking her in more closely. Something about her seemed off. She looks tired, Jo thought. Tense. Her smile was tight at the edges, and she kept smoothing her hands down the front of her blouse like she was trying to iron out her nerves. Jo frowned. "You okay?" she asked. "I'm sorry. I didn't see the text while I was elbows deep wrestling with a Subaru." Jo tilted her head. "Hey, wouldn't you normally be at work?"

Evelyn blinked. "What?"

"It's the middle of the day," Jo said, stepping closer. "Don't you usually have, like, twelve meetings and a sustainability crisis by now?"

Looking away, Evelyn hesitated. "I took the afternoon off," she murmured, and Jo's brow furrowed.

"Are you sick?"

"No," Evelyn said almost too quickly. "Well. Headache. Sort of."

Jo studied her for a beat. "You sure?"

"I'm fine," Evelyn said, waving a hand. "Really. I needed a break. And I wanted to see how things were going here."

"Okay," Jo said, not believing her entirely, but she didn't push. She nodded toward the Mustang. "We were talking about selling her."

"Oh no," she said, her eyes widening. "Is it that bad?"

Jo sighed. "Yeah," she said. "That bad."

Stepping even closer, Evelyn's hand brushed Jo's as she looked at the car. "Would it be enough?" she asked, and Jo shrugged.

"Maybe," Jo said. "But I don't want it to come to that."

"Then we won't let it," Evelyn said with more confidence in her voice than Jo felt. "We'll figure out something better." Evelyn's heart pounded. She wanted to tell Jo about her own dilemma, needed to actually, but every time she opened her mouth, the words got caught somewhere between her chest and her throat.

"Okay," Jo said, taking Evelyn's hand and leading her to the workbench. "What kind of ideas do you have? Please tell me you're not going to suggest a pin-up calendar.

Shaking her head, Evelyn laughed despite herself. "What would that look like?" she asked, and Jo laughed with her.

"Twelve Months of Mica."

"Oh no," Evelyn said, covering her mouth. "Please tell me she didn't already take photos."

"She did. And they're, uh... haunting."

Evelyn snorted, then leaned against the bench beside Jo, her shoulder brushing hers. "Okay, so we're not doing that."

"Definitely not."

They stood in silence for a moment. Evelyn glanced at Jo from the corner of her eye. She looked tired but not defeated. There was a spark there. Hope, she thought. Small, but real. She felt that reality tight in her stomach. I should tell her. Right now. Before

it gets worse. Taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth. “Jo, I—”

A car pulling up at the end of the garage bay made her pause. Then a car door slammed, and Jo sighed. “Hold that thought,” she said, brushing her hand lightly over Evelyn’s back before disappearing toward the entrance. Evelyn exhaled, her heart pounding. She stared down at her hands, twisting them together. Why is this so hard? she thought but knew the answer. Because once I say it, everything changes. Jo returned a few minutes later. “Only a tire-low light on. Easy one. Just needed a little air.”

Evelyn nodded. “That’s good.”

Jo tilted her head. “You were going to say something before?” she asked, and Evelyn took a deep breath.

“Right,” she said. “I—”

A shrill ringtone cut through the garage. Jo held up a finger as she pulled her phone from her pocket. “Sorry. One second.” She stepped away, answering with a distracted, “Hey, yeah. This is Jo.”

Evelyn watched her talk, her voice growing faint as she paced toward the office. She looked so capable, so strong, even when she was juggling a dozen things at once. And she trusted me, Evelyn thought. She told me about the garage, about Mr. Diaz, about how scared she was. She swallowed hard. And I’m still hiding this. The guilt surged again, hot and heavy. I have to tell her. But not in the middle of this. I will tonight.

When Jo returned, she looked apologetic. “Sorry,” she said. “Vendor call. They finally found a replacement for the diagnostic scanner, but it’s going to cost more than I want to say out loud.”

Reaching for her hand, Evelyn threaded their fingers together. “We’ll figure it out,” she said, and suddenly an idea started to form. “Wait. What if we did something here at the shop? Something that brings people in. Raises money. Gets the community involved.”

“Like what?” Jo asked with a frown.

“A fundraiser,” Evelyn said, the idea forming as she spoke. “But not a boring one. Something fun. A block party.”

Jo’s eyebrows lifted. “A block party?”

“Yeah,” Evelyn said, warming to the idea now. “We shut down the street for a few hours. Put out tables. Music. You offer discounted oil changes or car washes for donations to the shop. Maybe Mr. Diaz will grill. You can bake. I’ll make flyers. We invite everyone. Neighbors, customers, friends of customers.”

Rocking back on her heels, Jo looked like she was considering the option. “That’s actually not a bad idea,” she said. “A block party.”

Evelyn smiled. “Thanks,” she said. “I have a few good ones, but it will take some planning. Permits. Supplies. Volunteers.”

Her face falling, Jo shook her head. “I don’t know how to do any of that,” she said, and Evelyn took Jo’s face in her hands to look her in the eyes.

“I can help with that,” Evelyn said. “I know people in city planning. I can ask around. And if we do it on a Saturday, you could have live music. You must know somebody from the bar with a band.” Her whole body started to warm up to the idea. “Maybe a raffle. We could even have a ‘Selfie with Your Mechanic’ photo booth.”

Jo laughed. “That sounds terrifying.”

“It’ll be charming,” Evelyn said. “Trust me.”

Looking at her for a long moment, Jo finally nodded slowly and took Evelyn’s hands. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Evelyn laughed with excitement and felt some of her worries slip away for the moment. “Really?” she asked. “You’ll do it.”

“I’ll do it,” Jo said. “You’re right. It’s time I stopped trying to fix everything alone.”

A lump rose in Evelyn’s throat. She leaned in and kissed Jo softly, her hand resting against her cheek. When they pulled apart, Jo rested her forehead against hers. “Thank you,” she whispered.

With a heavy sigh, Evelyn closed her eyes. “Don’t thank me yet,” she said. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.” She pulled back and met Jo’s gaze again. “But there’s something I think you need to do before we do anything.”

“Yeah?”

Evelyn hesitated, then squeezed Jo’s hand. “You should tell Mr. Diaz,” she said, and Jo blinked.

“Tell him what? About the fundraiser?”

“No,” Evelyn said gently. “About the expenses. The insurance problem. Everything.”

With her smile fading slightly, Jo’s jaw tightened. “I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t want him to think I can’t handle it.”

“He won’t,” Evelyn said. “He trusted you enough to give you the garage. Don’t you think he’d want to help you keep it?” Jo looked away, silent. Evelyn touched her face. “You don’t have to ask for money. Simply let him know what’s going on. Invite him and Rosa to help with the block party. Let him be part of it.”

Jo stared at the floor for a long moment. Then she nodded once, slowly. “Yeah,” she

said softly. “Okay. I’ll talk to him.” Suddenly, Evelyn felt like a hypocrite telling Jo to reveal her secret when she still held her own.

She couldn’t wait any longer. “Jo,” she said, letting go of her lover’s hands and stepping back. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Twenty-One

“I’ve been looking for the best time to talk,” Evelyn said, her voice quiet but firm. She stepped back slightly, her hands dropping from Jo’s and folding in front of her like she was bracing herself for impact.

Jo’s stomach twisted. “Okay,” she said slowly. “What’s going on?”

Holding Jo’s gaze, Evelyn exhaled. “I’ve been offered a promotion at work,” she said. “A big one.” Jo didn’t speak, only waited, watching the way Evelyn’s shoulders squared up, like she was preparing for a fight. After a beat, Evelyn continued. “It’s a lead position on a sustainability pilot program and a huge opportunity. I’d be working with multiple institutions and agencies across the Pacific Northwest.”

Not quite understanding why Evelyn’s tone and posture didn’t match the news, Jo nodded once. “That sounds amazing,” she said. “What’s the catch?”

“There’s travel involved,” Evelyn said in a rush. “A lot of it. I’d still be based out of Portland, but likely be on the road for months at a time.”

Something cold settled in Jo’s chest. “Wow,” she said after a moment to collect her thoughts. “That’s... something.”

“I wanted to tell you sooner,” Evelyn said, stepping closer again. “I did. I just didn’t know how. And then everything with the break-in, and the barbeque, and well...” She trailed off, biting her lip. “I was afraid it would change things.”

Not ready to accept the churn of emotions inside her, Jo shrugged. “You gotta do what’s best for you,” she said. “Congratulations.”

Clearly surprised at the calm response, Evelyn blinked. “Jo—”

“No, seriously,” Jo interrupted, forcing a smile. “It’s okay. We’re not...” She gestured vaguely between them. “We’re not anything official.”

“That’s not what I—” Evelyn started.

Holding up a hand, Jo cut her off again. “I mean, we’ve only been seeing each other for a couple of weeks,” she said, still smiling, but it was starting to feel brittle. “It’s not like I expected you to plan your life around me.”

“That’s not what I’m doing either,” Evelyn said, taking a step back.

“Good,” Jo said, nodding. “Then you should take the job.” There was a long silence, and a part of Jo felt like a door was slowly closing.

Evelyn’s eyes searched Jo’s face, looking filled with a mix of emotions. “That’s it?” she asked quietly. “Simply congratulations and good luck?”

Jo looked away. “You’re smart, Evelyn. You’ve worked hard. You deserve this.”

“Right,” Evelyn said, her words sounding tight. “Okay.” Jo couldn’t bring herself to look at her again. If she did, she didn’t trust what she might say. She heard Evelyn sigh. “I should go,” I have a lot to think about.”

Still not meeting her eyes, Jo nodded. “Yeah,” she said. “Of course.”

Evelyn lingered for a second longer, like she was waiting for something, anything,

but Jo didn't move. Finally, Evelyn turned and walked toward the exit, her footsteps echoing through the garage. When she was gone, Jo let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Her chest felt tight. Her stomach felt hollow.

She rubbed a hand over her face. "What the hell was that?" she murmured before turning back to the Subaru, grabbing the wrench, and bending over the engine. She focused on the rusted bolt, hoping for a distraction, the metal groaning as she forced it loose. Why did I act like that? she thought. She told me something real. She opened up. And I shut down. She paused her work. But it's easier this way. Growling in frustration, she started on the bolt again. This is why I don't do serious. The bolt finally gave with a sharp jolt, and Jo swore as she banged her knuckles on the engine block.

"Whoa," a voice behind her said. Jo turned to see Mica standing at the edge of the bay. "Did that bolt insult your mother?" she asked with a raised eyebrow, and Jo sighed.

"Don't start."

Disregarding Jo's warning, as always, Mica stepped closer. "I saw Evelyn out the window getting in her car," she said. "She didn't look happy."

Jo busied herself wiping the spot of blood from her knuckle. "She's got a job offer," she said without looking at Mica. "A big one. She will travel all over the place, which means she won't be here."

"Oh. Shit."

"Yeah," Jo muttered. "She told me. I said congratulations."

Mica stared at her. "That's it?" she asked, and Jo looked hard at her.

“What else was I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know,” Mica said. “Something that doesn’t make her feel like a one-night stand?”

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Tossing aside the rag, Jo watched it miss the workbench and fall to the ground. That feels about right, she thought. I'm missing the mark on everything. "It's not like that," she finally said with a huff.

"Then what is it like?" Mica asked. "Because from where I'm standing, you let someone who clearly cares about you walk out of here thinking you don't give a damn."

Shaking her head, Jo didn't want to explain the details of her relationship with Evelyn to Mica. "It's complicated. Okay?"

"No. It's not okay and it's not that complicated," Mica said, crossing her arms. "You're scared. She matters. And that freaks you out." Jo looked away. Mica softened. "Look. You're allowed to feel things, Jo. You're allowed to want her to stay close."

Not responding, Jo stared at the open garage door and the street beyond it, trying to understand what she felt. Is Mica right? she wondered. Should I have asked her to stay? She blew out a frustrated breath. "I'll think about it," she muttered.

"Good. But don't wait too long," Mica said. "Or you'll lose your chance."

Evelyn gripped the steering wheel with both hands, her knuckles white as she pulled away from Jo's garage. Keeping her eyes on the road, she clenched her jaw, trying to keep her breathing steady, but her throat was tight. That's it? she thought. That's all she had to say? She blinked hard, the sting of tears already threatening as Jo's voice echoed in her head. "You should take the job. You've worked hard. You deserve

this.” No fight. No hesitation. No “I want you to stay” or “Let’s figure it out.” Only a polite brush-off, like Evelyn had told her she was going to Seattle for the weekend, not that she might be gone for months. Long enough for everything between them to fade into nothing.

Knowing she wasn’t focused enough to drive, she turned into a grocery store lot. After throwing the car into park, she slumped back in her seat and stared at the dashboard. She didn’t know what she had expected. A plea? she wondered. A promise? Something that matched what we shared, what we said with our bodies, if not yet with words. Rubbing her burning eyes, Evelyn tried to calm herself as her anger grew along with her hurt. But Jo looked at me like none of it mattered. She blew out a frustrated breath. So fine then.

She reached for her phone with trembling fingers and scrolled to Dr. Wong’s contact. Closing her eyes, she pressed CALL before she could talk herself out of it. The line rang once. Twice. “Dr. Wong.”

“Hi, it’s Evelyn,” she said, her voice tight. “I’ve made my decision.”

There was a pause, and then, “Yes?”

“I’m accepting the offer,” Evelyn said, her voice a little stronger now. “I’d like to move forward with the new position.”

“Excellent. I’ll inform the board,” Dr. Wong said. “We’ll begin transition planning immediately.”

“Thank you,” Evelyn said. “I’ll be in tomorrow to go over any paperwork.”

She ended the call before Dr. Wong could say anything else and stared at the screen. Then, she opened her messages and sent a text to her sister. “Told Jo. She took it fine,

I guess. I also called Dr. Wong. Took the job. It's done."

Hesitating a moment longer, she opened a new text to Jo. "Thank you for understanding. I'll still help with the block party, of course."

The reply from Jo came back a minute later. One word. "Sure."

Evelyn stared at it. Her chest clenched. That's all I get? she wondered. Sure. Tears blurred her vision. Dropping the phone into the passenger seat, she pressed the heel of her hand against her mouth as the first sob slipped out. Then another. And another. She cried for the weight of the decision, for the way Jo hadn't tried to stop her, for how deeply it hurt to realize the person you were falling for wasn't ready to fall too. Sitting in her car in the parking lot, she cried until she couldn't anymore, and the pain was nothing but a dull ache. Wiping her face with a Kleenex from the glovebox, she stared out the windshield at the other cars in the lot. I made the right choice. I have to do what's best for me. But her voice was shaky, even in her own head.

Unable to focus on the tire rotation that was next on the to-do list, Jo simply stared at the lug nuts like they were written in a foreign language. Her brain spun too fast to follow one clear thought. I said all the right things, didn't I? She knew she had said the supportive, mature things. "You gotta do what's best for you." Jo turned and put the air impact gun aside. And really, what else was there? Please stay? I want more? She shook her head as she walked away from the car. No way. That's not me. Without thinking, she grabbed her keys from the hook by the office door, shrugged on her leather jacket, and headed outside. Mica poked her head out the window as Jo mounted her bike.

"Where are you going?" Mica called.

"Out," Jo said shortly. "I need you to finish that tire rotation and then lock up." She jammed her helmet on and kicked the bike into gear. The engine roared to life

beneath her, and she took off down the street before Mica could press for more answers.

Heading across town, she weaved through traffic easily. She refused to think about Evelyn. She didn't want to think about how the woman's voice cracked slightly when Jo had brushed her off. She didn't think about Evelyn's text. "Thank you for understanding. I'll still help with the block party, of course." She didn't think about the single word she'd sent back. "Sure." Instead, she focused on the road. Until a familiar neighborhood came into view.

She pulled up in front of the small, tidy house with the lawn neatly trimmed. Mr. Diaz's place. After turning off the engine, she sat for a moment, trying to get up the courage to walk inside. Finally, she swung her leg over the bike and headed up the walk to knock. Jo heard heavy footsteps from somewhere in the house, and when the door opened, Mr. Diaz blinked at her, clearly surprised. "Jo," he said, his eyes narrowing with concern. "Well, this is unexpected. Everything all right?"

"No," Jo said. "Not really." Mr. Diaz stepped aside without another word, and Jo entered the familiar home. This was a place where she always felt good and taken care of.

"Sit," Mr. Diaz said, motioning to the worn recliner. Jo didn't argue as Mr. Diaz disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, then returned with two bottles of beer. He handed one to her, then settled into the couch across from her. He made an appraising gaze then said, "Okay, talk."

Taking a swallow of beer to help clear her throat, Jo stalled for time. Finally, she sighed. "I was gonna wait until the block party to tell you," she started. "But it's too much now." The man didn't reply. Only waited. "You know all about the break-in at the shop. How they took a bunch of parts, tools, equipment. Expensive stuff I can't easily replace."

“Yes,” he said. “How could I forget?”

“Right,” Jo replied, forcing herself not to squirm. “Well, I wasn’t super concerned because I thought the insurance would cover it.”

“And it didn’t?”

Jo shook her head. “Not all of it,” she answered. “Turns out there were exclusions I didn’t know about. I’m out thousands.”

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For a beat, Mr. Diaz didn't speak, and Jo drank again, waiting. Finally, he let out a sigh. "I see," he said, and Jo looked at him.

"I've been brainstorming ideas to raise the money though," she said. "And I've got a plan."

Mr. Diaz's brow furrowed. "That's why you want to do a block party?"

"Yeah," Jo said. "Evelyn suggested it. Community event. Raffle, food, car washes. Get people to donate."

"It's a good idea," Mr. Diaz said, nodding slowly.

Jo exhaled. "Yeah, it is," she said. "But if I'm still short. I will sell the Mustang."

That made Mr. Diaz sit up straighter. "The Fastback?" he asked, and Jo nodded.

"I don't want to, but..."

"No," Mr. Diaz said. "You shouldn't have to."

"I don't know what else to do."

They sat together in silence for a moment, drinking their beer, until Mr. Diaz leaned forward and patted Jo on the knee. "You know, when I gave you that shop, it wasn't only because you were good with a wrench," he said. Jo looked at him. "I gave it to you because you gave a damn. You cared about the people. You cared about doing it

right. That's what mattered to me." Jo felt her throat tighten, and she didn't trust herself to speak. Mr. Diaz shook his head. "You're not failing. You're just facing something hard."

Clearing her throat, Jo nodded. "Thank you," she said. "That means a lot to me."

Mr. Diaz gave her a look. "It should," he said before breaking into a grin. "Now, tell me how Rosa and I can help. I'm assuming you've got Mica onboard, and your new girlfriend is ready to make it all happen."

Looking at her beer before she answered, Jo was not sure how to respond. Her text said she would still help, Jo thought. Girlfriend or not, I believe her. Finally, she looked at Mr. Diaz. "Of course."

Twenty-Two

Late for the orientation for her new job, Evelyn ran through the building. She was never late and couldn't believe she allowed it to happen today of all days. The hallway seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of her, tile floors echoing beneath her sensible heels. For some reason, she had trouble seeing where she was going, but she knew she had to keep moving. The meeting was very important.

Turning a corner, Evelyn was suddenly in Jo's garage. Completely confused, she skidded to a stop and looked around. Jo stood at the far end, her back to Evelyn, her leather jacket hanging from a hook nearby. She looked strangely calm. "Jo," Evelyn said, but her voice came out softly. She cleared her throat. "Jo, listen." Jo didn't turn, and Evelyn moved toward her, but her feet felt clumsy. "Jo, please." Still no response.

Suddenly, Dr. Wong stepped from the shadows. "You're late," she said with a frown. "I thought you wanted this promotion."

“What?” Evelyn asked, spinning to face her boss. In a beat, she was back in the office, only it wasn’t her normal office.

Oliver sat in a chair nearby, his arms crossed over his chest. “You can’t have everything, Evelyn,” he said, shaking his head. “This isn’t one of your romance novels. Real life doesn’t work that way.”

“I don’t want everything,” Evelyn tried to say. “I only want—”

Evelyn jerked awake, her heart pounding, the sheets tangled around her. Gasping for breath, her nightshirt clung to her damp skin. She sat up slowly, pressing a hand to her chest. It was only a dream, she assured herself, but the ache deep inside didn’t go away. But then why do I feel so sad? She reached for her phone on the nightstand and saw it was 5:42 A.M. and groaned. There was no way she was getting back to sleep after the nightmare.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, phone in hand, she opened Jo’s contact. Evelyn hadn’t heard from her since the text exchange yesterday. After I told her about the job, she thought. But that I’d still help with the block party. She reread Jo’s reply. The one-word answer. “Sure.” Evelyn stared at the screen for a long moment, then started to type.

“Hey. I know it’s early, but I couldn’t sleep. I wanted to check in. Are you okay?” She hesitated, but then took a deep breath and hit send. The message went, and the screen stayed silent. She waited, and five minutes passed. Starting to feel a little concerned, she got out of bed and went to make coffee. Ten minutes and no reply. Maybe she is asleep, she thought. Or maybe she’s ignoring me. She typed again. “I know things ended kind of abruptly the other day. I didn’t mean to drop everything on you like that. I just didn’t know how else to say it.”

As she drank her coffee, there was still no response. Frustration setting in, she typed

another message to Jo. “I wanted you to know that I did accept the job. It starts in two and a half weeks.” Evelyn stared at the message for a long time, then finally hit send. Setting the phone on the kitchen counter, she stared out the window. She didn’t cry. Not this time. There were no tears left, only the hollow ache of knowing she had made the right choice, yet somehow, it didn’t feel right at all.

Lying in her bed, Jo stared at the ceiling as the early morning light coming through her window let her know the world had started to shift from night into day. Sleep was out of the question. Her body was still, but her mind was a mess, spinning with thoughts she didn’t want to face. The break-in. The insurance mess. Selling the Mustang. The block party she wasn’t sure she could pull off.

And Evelyn.

Jo hadn’t opened the texts, but saw they were from her. Messages Jo wasn’t ready to read yet. Rolling onto her side, she stared at the phone on her nightstand, the screen still black. She didn’t reach for it. Instead, she threw back the covers, got up, and slipped on a pair of loose shorts and a tank. Coffee didn’t interest her, and she was definitely not hungry for breakfast. There was something else she needed, and she went straight to the spare bedroom, the one she had converted into a home gym years ago. The room was small with enough space for a bench, a rack of free weights, a yoga mat she barely used, and in the far corner, suspended from a steel bracket in the ceiling, the heavy bag.

Standing in front of it barefoot, she slipped on her worn leather gloves and flexed her fingers inside them, rolling her shoulders. She didn’t warm up. She didn’t need to. Just bobbed on the balls of her feet, and in a flash, threw a jab at the bag. It landed with a satisfying thud, making the bag shudder on its chain. She followed with a cross, then another jab. Her body moved on instinct, the rhythm familiar. Jab, cross, jab. Cross, hook. Pivoting on the balls of her feet, her breath came sharp through her nose, and her arms already burned. She kept going. The bag rocked on its chain, the

sound of impact loud in the quiet room. She hit harder. Faster. Her breath started to come out in grunts, her muscles straining with each strike. Jab. Cross. Hook. Hook. Uppercut.

Sweat stained her tank top, as she pictured the insurance adjuster's smug smile and drove a left hook into the bag so hard the chain groaned. Then, out of nowhere, she heard Evelyn's soft voice. "Jo, there's something I need to tell you." With a growl, Jo hit the bag faster.

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And I told her to take the job, she thought. Like it didn't matter. Jo's gloves slammed into the bag, her arms shaking with effort. Her lungs burned. Her legs burned. Her heart burned. With a cry of anger and pain, she collapsed onto the mat, breathing hard, her chest heaving. Her whole body buzzed with adrenaline, and still her mind raced. Pulling off the gloves, she tossed them aside and grabbed a nearby towel, wiping sweat from her face. Finally, she reached for her phone. The screen lit up, and she saw a new message from Evelyn. Her hand shaking, she opened it. "I also wanted you to know that I did accept the job. It starts in two and a half weeks." Jo stared at it for a long time as the sweat cooled on her body. She didn't reply. Instead, she tossed the phone beside her and lay flat on the mat, her head resting against the cool surface. Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift. Deep down, she wasn't truly mad at Evelyn. She was mad at the timing. At the universe. At the way life had kicked her when she finally let someone in. And now that person is leaving, she thought. Jo didn't cry, she didn't yell, but only lay there, her body aching, her fists bruised, and her heart breaking.

Fighting five o'clock traffic, Evelyn barely remembered the drive to Jasmine's. Her brain was fried, her back was tight from sitting at her desk all day, and her heart was a quiet, persistent ache that pulsed every time she thought about Jo—which was often. She parked in front of her sister's townhouse and sat in the car for a moment, staring out the windshield. Her phone sat in the cupholder beside her. It had been all day, and still no reply from Jo.

Evelyn checked it at least thirty times throughout the day, pretending she wasn't disappointed. Pretending she hadn't felt a small flicker of hope every time it buzzed, only to realize it was only another calendar alert or a group text from her coworkers about the office coffee machine. With a sigh, she grabbed her bag and headed up the

walkway.

Jasmine opened the door before Evelyn even knocked, wearing yoga pants and a Seahawks hoodie, and holding a half-full glass of wine. “Ah ha,” she said, stepping aside. “If it isn’t my favorite sister with the world’s most complicated love life.”

Giving her sister a tired smile, Evelyn stepped inside. “I brought chocolate,” she said, holding up a paper bag.

With a wide smile, Jasmine snatched it with one hand. “Then you may enter,” she said and led them to the small but tidy kitchen. The room smelled like lavender and garlic, which shouldn’t have worked together but somehow did. A candle burned on the kitchen island, and a pot of something simmered on the stove. Evelyn dropped her laptop bag on the kitchen table chair and kicked off her flats with a sigh of relief. “God, my feet hurt,” she said. “Everything hurts actually.”

“Then you are officially in the right place,” Jasmine said, already rummaging through the sack Evelyn brought. After a beat, she pulled a dark chocolate sea salt almond bar that Evelyn always brought when she needed comfort. Jasmine popped a piece of it in her mouth and closed her eyes to savor the treat before refocusing on Evelyn. “Wine?”

“Yes, please.”

Handing her a glass, her sister gestured toward the hallway. “Go change. I laid out some leggings and one of my sweatshirts in the guest room,” she said. “Get out of your ‘I’m a professionaladult’ outfit and into something that says ‘I’m barely holding it together but at least I’m cozy.’”

Evelyn laughed despite herself. “You know me too well.”

“You’re easy,” Jasmine said with a wink. “Go. I’ll serve up some dinner.”

Doing what she was told, Evelyn headed to the bedroom. Once inside, she shut the door behind her and leaned against it for a moment, clutching the glass of wine. The quiet pressed in around her, a stark contrast to the chaos of her thoughts. With a deep sigh, she took a long sip before peeling off her blouse and slacks. She caught her reflection in the mirror and paused. Her eyes were rimmed with red, and the blankness in her expression startled her. “You’re fine,” she whispered, though it didn’t sound convincing.

After pulling her hair up into a messy bun, she scrubbed the makeup off her face and pulled the sweatshirt Jasmine had laid out over her head. It read “SHE PERSISTED” across the chest, making Evelyn smile the first time all day. By the time she tugged on her black leggings, she felt more like herself.

Emerging from the guest room, she dropped onto the couch with a sigh. Jasmine handed her a bowl of pasta and curled up beside her. “Okay,” she said. “Start talking.”

Pausing to collect her thoughts, Evelyn took a sip of wine before answering. “I started the paperwork today,” she said. “For the job.”

“So this is one hundred percent real?” Jasmine said, her eyes widening, and Evelyn nodded.

“It’s real,” she said. “No regrets.”

“Wow, Evie,” Jasmine said, looking impressed. “I mean, that’s huge. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks,” Evelyn said as she poked at her pasta. “It’s only that I thought I’d feel

more excited.”

“You don’t?”

“I do,” Evelyn said. “Kind of. I mean, it’s an amazing opportunity. I’ll be doing work that matters. I’ll be leading a team. I’ll get to travel and meet people and see real progress on the ground.” She paused, then sighed. “But it’s like there’s this weight on top of it. Like I’m carrying two things at once. Excitement and guilt.”

“Guilt?” Jasmine asked around a bite of pasta. “About Jo?”

Evelyn nodded. “I told her,” she said, feeling a pang of pain. “And she was fine.” She took a deep breath. “Too fine. Like she was already letting go.”

Jasmine winced. “Ouch.”

“I thought maybe she would say something,” Evelyn said, staring into her bowl. “Not so much that she would ask me to stay. But at least say it sucked or show some emotion. But she told me to take the job. Like it didn’t matter.”

Pursing her lips, Jasmine was quiet for a moment. “Maybe she thought that’s what you wanted to hear,” she finally said. “Have you considered that?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean. You’ve spent your whole life being the responsible one. The achiever. The one who doesn’t waver,” Jasmine said. “Maybe Jo thought if she gave you an ounce of hesitation, you would think she was trying to hold you back.”

“But I don’t think that,” Evelyn said. “And I truly appreciate it. It’s only...”

She trailed off, and Jasmine nodded. “You wonder if Jo thinks things are over.”

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“Right,” Evelyn said, her throat tight. “But I don’t want things to be over.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“No,” Evelyn admitted.

“Then how was she supposed to know?”

Evelyn considered her sister’s words. “I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I was thrown off by her complete lack of emotion.”

Jasmine reached over and took her hand. “Evie, you’re not moving to Thailand,” she said. “You’re not disappearing into the jungle. You’re going to be on the road, sure, but you’ll still be based here. You’ll still have a home.”

Confused, Evelyn’s brow furrowed. “Of course,” she said. “But so?”

“So,” Jasmine said, squeezing her hand. “Maybe Jo doesn’t have to be part of the life you’re leaving behind. Maybe she’s part of the one you’re building.”

Feeling a hint of relief for the first time since Dr. Wong told her about the promotion, Evelyn’s chest relaxed a little. “You think she would be open to that?” she asked, and Jasmine nodded.

“I think that if you talked to her like you were planning a future instead of saying goodbye,” she said with a shrug. “She might surprise you.”

“A long-distance relationship,” Evelyn said slowly, letting the idea sink in. “I mean, that’s what it would be.”

“Yeah,” Jasmine said. “Exactly, you’ll have weekends. Holidays. Time between trips.” She laughed. “Come on, you both have phones. You can text. Video chat.”

Evelyn nodded, starting to process how things would work. “I don’t want to lose her,” she said. “We could make it past this. Dr. Wong said it might be only for four to five months.”

“Even better,” Jasmine said with a smile. “It’s not like you’re asking her to do this forever.”

“You’re right,” Evelyn said. “This is only temporary, and it shouldn’t stop us from getting to know each other.”

“Then talk to Jo,” Jasmine said. “Not about what’s ending, but about what’s possible.”

Sitting in silence for a while, Evelyn sipped her wine, her thoughts racing. Could this really work? she wondered. Will Jo be willing? Suddenly, everything felt clearer. She looked at her sister. “Thanks,” she said. “For the sweatshirt. And the wine. And the wisdom.”

Jasmine raised her glass. “It’s what older sisters are for,” she said as they clinked glasses and drank. For the first time, Evelyn felt like things didn’t have to be over, and maybe they were only changing. She simply had to explain it to Jo.

Twenty-Three

As the morning light filtered through the newly repaired windows, Jo stood in the

center of her garage. The shop smelled like oil, rubber, and the faint remnants of the cinnamon rolls Mica brought in an hour ago. Everything was as it should be, and yet, Jo wasn't happy. She hadn't slept again. Blowing out a frustrated breath, her eyes wandered to the covered Mustang and frowned. Mica was across the bay, standing under a Volvo, pretending to work on a simple oil change, but she took longer than necessary. Jo knew her friend was sizing up the situation.

"You know," Mica said without looking Jo's way. "You're staring at that car like it holds all the answers."

With arms crossed and her jaw tight, Jo didn't answer. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mica glance at her.

"You thinking about selling it again?"

"I don't know."

Mica sighed, pulling out the drained oil filter. "That's not a no."

"It's a maybe."

"You said you'd only sell it if there was no other choice."

Jo looked at Mica. "There might not be another choice," she said.

Mica set the filter aside. "Okay," she said. "You want to talk about what's really going on? Or should I keep pretending that we're actually worried about the Mustang right now?"

Keeping her expression unreadable, Jo didn't blink. "What do you mean?" she asked. "What else is this about?"

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“Let’s see,” Mica said, crossing her arms. “You’ve been weird ever since Evelyn dropped the news about the possible job change. You’ve barely touched your phone. And you’re not talking about the block party you agreed to let her help plan.”

With a sigh, Jo stared at the concrete floor. “She might not help anymore,” she said quietly, and Mica blinked.

“Wait. What?”

“She’s taking it,” Jo said, the words flat. “The job. Sent me a text yesterday.”

Mica’s eyes widened. “Wow, then she’s moving away?” she asked, and Jo shrugged.

“Not exactly,” Jo said. “She’ll still be based here, but she’ll be traveling a lot. Weeks at a time.”

Shaking her head, Mica stared at her. “So what?” she asked. “You called it quits?”

Jo shook her head. “Not officially,” she said. “But I don’t see another option.”

“And that’s it?” Mica asked, her eyes wide.

“Pretty much.”

“Jo.” Mica took a step forward, her voice rising. “You’re telling me you two haven’t talked about this?”

“Why would we?” Jo snapped. “She made her decision.”

Looking at the ceiling, Mica was quiet for a beat. “You’re such a coward sometimes,” she finally muttered.

Scowling, Jo narrowed her eyes. “Easy with that,” she said.

Mica held up her hands as if in surrender. “All I mean is,” Mica said, softer now. “You care about her. Don’t pretend you don’t. And you’re feeling hurt about it, so instead of fighting for her, you let her go.”

Jo’s jaw tightened. “She’s the one who said yes to the job,” she replied. “I don’t care what you think, but I wasn’t going to beg her to stay. Even if I wanted to, that wouldn’t make sense after two weeks.”

“Okay, okay. I can see that,” Mica said. “But you can’t pretend nothing happened between you. You need to talk. Did she text you?”

Swallowing hard, Jo continued to look away, not wanting to see Mica’s face when she told her the truth. “She sent me some texts yesterday,” she answered. “But I didn’t answer them.”

“Oh my God.” Mica threw her hands in the air. “She probably thinks you hate her.”

“I don’t hate her,” Jo said. “I only...”

“You only what?” Mica asked. “Don’t know how to deal with the fact that someone finally made you feel something real?” Jo’s silence was answer enough. Mica softened. “Hey, Jo, you’ve been my friend for a long time, so I can be the one to tell you that you’re not allowed to shut her out and then act like she’s the one walking away.”

Running a hand through her hair, Jo paced toward the Mustang. “I don’t know if I can do this,” she said. “The block party. The garage. Everything feels like it’s falling apart.”

“Well,” Mica said. “Then let us help you hold it together. I know that’s what Evelyn was trying to do. That’s what I’m trying to do. But you’ve gotta let us.”

Jo stopped, her hand resting on the Mustang’s hood through the tarp. Somehow, it helped her feel steady. She closed her eyes for a second, then turned back to Mica. “You think she’ll still help?” she asked. “After I ghosted her?”

“Honestly? I think she’s probably waiting for you to give her a reason to,” Mica said. “Send her a text.”

“Now?” Jo said as she raised an eyebrow.

Mica rolled her eyes. “Yes, now,” she said. “Something simple. Something honest. You don’t have to write her a love letter. Just let her know you’re still here.”

After hesitating for a beat, Jo pulled her phone from her back pocket. She read Evelyn’s last message. “I wanted you to know that I did accept the job. It starts in two and a half weeks.” Jo stared at it for a long moment, not letting herself react to the words that stung so deeply.

Taking a long breath, she tapped to reply. “Hey. I’m sorry I didn’t text you back. I didn’t know what to say. I still don’t, really.” She paused. Looked at the words. Then she deleted the words and typed a new message. “Hey. I’m sorry I didn’t text you back. I should have.” Another beat and then she added three more words. “I miss you.” Before she could do anything else, Jo hit send.

Sitting at the long conference table, Evelyn nodded politely as her new project

coordinator droned on about stakeholder communication protocols. The woman, who was bright, efficient, and very enthusiastic, had handed Evelyn a thick binder full of acronyms and onboarding materials. Evelyn smiled, and murmured, “Thanks,” and tried not to look like her mind was somewhere else. Because it was.

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Her phone buzzed in her blazer pocket, and Evelyn didn't move at first. Her professional instinct told her to ignore it, but something in her gut twisted. Holding up a finger to politely interrupt, she reached into her pocket and glanced at the screen. Jo. Her heart stuttered. The message could say anything good or bad, but she had to read it. "Excuse me," she said, rising from her seat before she could think twice. "I'm so sorry, but I need to step out for a moment and answer this text."

Looking surprised but polite, her new colleague nodded. "Of course," she said. "Take your time." Evelyn didn't hesitate. She slipped out of the conference room and into the hallway, ducking into a quiet alcove near the water cooler. Once alone, she stared at the screen and read the message.

The last line made her suck in a breath. "I miss you." Evelyn's eyes stung, but she smiled anyway.

Tapping quickly, she typed her reply. "I miss you too. We need to talk." She waited, heart pounding.

It didn't take long for Jo to respond. "Yeah. We do." Evelyn bit her lip. She stared at the screen, trying to find the best way to answer without getting too close to the real topic they needed to discuss. Doing it by text was not what she wanted.

After a beat, she typed again. "How's the block party planning going?"

There was a pause, then Jo's reply. "Honestly? I'm still not sure we can pull it off."

Evelyn exhaled slowly, her fingers moving without hesitation now. "Can we meet

after work? Talk about it. All of it?”

The answer came right back. “I’d like that. You up for a ride? Go somewhere quiet.”

A rush of warmth filled Evelyn’s chest, and she wrote back. “I’d love that. Tell me when and where.”

“I’ll pick you up at your place after work,” Jo messaged. “Wear something warm.”

Evelyn smiled, her heart lighter than it had been in days. She slid the phone into her pocket and took a deep breath, trying to refocus on work. It wasn’t easy. When she returned to the conference room, the project coordinator was waiting. “Everything okay?” she asked, and Evelyn nodded.

“Never better,” she replied, thinking of being on the back of the motorcycle with Jo. The wait was going to make it a long afternoon.

Leaning into the curve of the road, with the early evening sun slanting low through the trees, Jo wound their way toward Mount Tabor Park. The GTO had been tempting, but something about taking the motorcycle felt right. Evelyn’s arms were wrapped snugly around Jo’s waist, her body pressed close, and Jo could feel every subtle shift in weight. She hadn’t realized how much she had missed the feeling of Evelyn’s body against hers. Jo’s heart beat a little faster, not from the ride, but from the woman holding on to her like she didn’t want to let go.

They crested a small hill, the road narrowing as they approached the entrance to the park. Jo slowed the bike and pulled into a gravel turnout near the base of the hill. She cut the engine, the sudden silence filled only by birdsong and the distant hum of traffic. As if it were something she did every day, Evelyn slid off the bike behind her, pulling off her helmet and shaking out her hair. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. “Mount Tabor,” she said. “I love this place.” She glanced up the wide path

that led into the trees. “I used to come here all the time when I lived on the eastside. I loved to hike the trails, and it gave me time to think.”

Jo smiled as she dismounted, unhooking the blanket she had strapped to the back of the bike. “Great,” she said. “Figured it was your kind of spot.”

Evelyn turned to look at her with a soft smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Jo said, returning her smile. “I’m thinking we could go to the clearing near the top with the great view. If you’re up to climbing the hill.”

“And if not?” Evelyn asked, raising an eyebrow. “Were you planning to carry me?”

“Maybe,” she said with a little laugh. “Don’t tempt me.” They started walking, the wide path winding through towering evergreens and moss-covered oaks. They passed a few joggers, a couple walking a golden retriever, and a kid on a longboard. Jo glanced at Evelyn as they walked. The woman’s face was calm, but there was a tension in her shoulders that hadn’t been there the last time they saw each other. Jo wanted to take her hand, but she didn’t. It didn’t feel right yet.

Climbing the last set of stone stairs, Jo led them off the main path to a grassy overlook tucked away behind a grove of trees. The city stretched out below them. “Wow,” Evelyn stopped. “This is beautiful. We’re lucky it’s so clear.”

Pausing to look, Jo had to agree. It was a perfect setting. She carefully unrolled the blanket on the grass and dropped onto it while Evelyn sat beside her, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. For a moment, they sat in silence, watching the sun dip lower.

Not sure where to start, Jo cleared her throat. “Okay,” she said, not looking at Evelyn. “Block party.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Jo saw Evelyn glance at her, then look back at the view. “Yeah,” she said. “Block party.”

Her stomach tightening, Jo took a deep breath. “You still think I should do it?” she asked, and Evelyn nodded.

“I do,” Evelyn said softly. “I think it could help. And not only financially. I mean, yeah, it will raise money, but it’s more than that. It’s about reminding people what your shop means to the community. About giving them a reason to show up for you.”

Jo looked at her. “You think people will? Because I’m not so sure.”

When Evelyn turned to look in Jo’s eyes, her gaze held steady. “I know they will,” she said. “The garage has been a part of the community for a long time, and I know people respect you and Mr. Diaz before you.”

Still not sure, Jo swallowed. “It’s a lot of work,” she said. “And we don’t have much time to organize it.”

“I know,” Evelyn said gently. “But you won’t be doing it alone. I’ll help. Mica, Mr. Diaz, Rosa... all of us will.”

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Feeling a renewed sense of hope, Jo took a deep breath. “Thank you,” she said, then smiled. “Let’s do it.”

“Yay,” Evelyn said, reaching for Jo’s hand, and then hesitating. “Sorry.”

She started to pull her hand back, but Jo caught it. “Don’t be,” she said, lacing their fingers together. They sat in silence for a few moments before Jo ran her other hand through her hair. “I’m sorry I didn’t text you back sooner.”

Evelyn squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry I dropped everything on you like that,” she said. “That wasn’t fair.” Not sure how to respond, Jo simply nodded, letting Evelyn continue. “I know the job changes things. But I think we can figure it out. If you’re willing to try.”

“Okay,” Jo said, not sure what Evelyn was asking. “Try how?”

“A long-distance relationship for four or five months,” Evelyn answered in a rush. “I know it’s not perfect, but people do it all the time.”

A long-distance relationship, Jo thought, working through what that meant. Committed, serious... after only a couple of weeks. Still, the idea of not being with Evelyn made her chest tighten. She had never felt these emotions toward anyone. So, what does that mean? Is a relationship what I really want? She simply wasn’t sure. “I need to think about it,” she said softly. “But I’m not saying no.”

A relieved smile crossed Evelyn’s face. “That’s all I can ask.”

Twenty-Four

Juggling her laptop tote and shoulder bag, Evelyn shouldered the apartment building's front door open with her hip. She took the stairs up to her apartment two at a time. Her mind churned as fast as her legs. The past two weeks had passed in a blur. Long days spent in back-to-back meetings at the new job, followed by evenings spent helping Jo prep for the block party. But tonight it was Friday, and there was lots of fun planned. Or it's supposed to be fun, she thought as she reached the third floor and power-walked down the hall. Jo was picking her up in less than an hour. Plenty of time. Maybe. If I don't let myself get distracted. There had been a lot of that lately.

Her keys jingling in her hand, Evelyn reached her door and unlocked it, stepping inside with a deep exhale. She dropped her bags by the door and kicked off her shoes, already loosening the buttons on her blouse as she crossed into her bedroom. Her phone rang as she peeled off her work clothes. She gave it a quick glance. Jasmine. She nearly ignored it, knowing she needed every second if she wanted to shower, fix her hair, and squeeze into that dangerously short black dress Jasmine lent her. Still, it was her sister who always meant well. With a sigh, she grabbed the phone. "Hey," she answered, pinning the phone between her ear and shoulder as she opened her underwear drawer.

"Well, hello to you too," Jasmine said, voice playful. "I thought I'd check in before the big night. You know, one last reality check before you strut off to your glamorous job and leave us commoners behind."

Evelyn rolled her eyes, tugging a black lace bralette from the drawer. "It's not glamorous," she said. "It's reviewing data from a half dozen different sources and a running tally of who's behind on submitting their monthly field reports."

"Mmm. Sexy." Ignoring her, Evelyn moved to her closet, pulling out the little black dress. Just holding it up made her pulse quicken. It hadn't been very long ago that

wearing a sexy blouse to the bar felt overwhelming. But Jo should really like this, she thought. And I need that now more than ever.

She laid the dress on the bed. “What time are you getting to Sapphire?”

“Leaving within the next hour,” Jasmine said. “I even talked Sophie and Brooke into dressing extra sexy. We’ll be sitting near the DJ.” There was a pause. “Are you okay, though? You sound... I don’t know. Frazzled.”

Evelyn headed to the bathroom. “I’m fine,” she said, turning on the shower. “It’s just been a long two weeks. Transitioning into the new job, then the block party planning on top of it.” She forced a smile into her voice. “Don’t worry. Really.”

“Okay,” Jasmine said, her tone sounding like she wasn’t entirely convinced Evelyn was fine. “And how’s Jo?”

That one made Evelyn pause. How is Jo? she wondered and looked at herself in the mirror. “She’s good. I think. We’ve been working together a lot, but honestly, she’s been kind of distant.”

“Distant how?”

Sighing, Evelyn leaned against the counter. “She’s still sweet,” she said. “She texts me first thing every morning. But it’s been... I don’t know. Surface-level? Ever since we talked at the park.” Evelyn bit her lip, trying not to overthink everything, but it was hard. “And she hasn’t stayed over. Or asked me to stay there. In fact, it seems like we are never alone with Mica or Mr. Diaz or someone else around helping to plan the block party.”

“Really?” Jasmine said, and Evelyn watched her bathroom mirror start to fog.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “We’ve had a couple of goodnight kisses, but they weren’t like before.” She hesitated, thinking of how to describe them. “They kind of felt polite. Very PG13.”

Jasmine was quiet for a long beat. “Have you talked to her about it?”

“No,” Evelyn said, frustrated with herself. “I don’t want to pressure her. Everything’s already changing. She’s dealing with the shop and the break-in fallout, and now the block party. I don’t want to add to her stress only because I miss touching her.”

“Evie, it’s okay to want to be close to someone you care about,” Jasmine said gently. “That’s not pressure. That’s vulnerability. Huge difference.”

Evelyn let the words settle in. “Maybe,” she said. “I’m just hoping tonight can bring us back to how we were.”

“Then wear the black dress.” Jasmine’s smile was practically audible. “It stopped traffic when I wore it at our cousin’s New Year’s Eve party two years ago,” she said. It will work tonight. Wear it and remind Jo exactly what she’s missing out on.” With a laugh, Evelyn hung up and set the phone on the vanity. She stepped out of her underwear and into the hot spray, washing off the day inch by inch. Beneath the mounting stress, the pressure of change, and the dull ache of uncertainty, there was still a hope that tonight Jo would look at her and remember everything they hadn’t said yet.

The GTO purred down Burnside like it had something to prove. In the passenger seat, Evelyn adjusted the hem of her black dress, and Jo felt it happening again. That crazy flare of chemistry in her chest. And let’s be honest, a few other places on my body, she thought. It happened every time Evelyn was near her. The woman was beautiful, intelligent, and more thoughtful than anyone had a right to be, and all Jo could think about was how she had no idea what she was going to do. Or how to not screw

everything up.

She gripped the wheel a little tighter. They hadn't said much since Jo picked up Evelyn. Only a quick "You look amazing" and a light kiss on the cheek. For a beat, Evelyn looked like she wanted to initiate something more, but then she settled into the passenger seat. As Jo pulled away from the curb, she was never more confused. It was Friday night. My night, she thought. Where I walk through Sapphire like I own the place. She clenched her jaw a little. Walking in solo. But tonight she was not walking in solo. She was walking in with Evelyn.

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Add in that it was also the night before the important block party and possibly her last shot at keeping the garage above water. And basically Evelyn's going-away party, she thought. I don't think I could have packed more freight into this evening if I tried.

Turning into the alley beside Sapphire, Jo slipped into her usual spot. She killed the engine.

Evelyn looked at her. "You doing okay?" she asked softly, reaching across the console to touch Jo's arm.

That small gesture made Jo's heart soften, but she wasn't ready to go there, so instead she forced her usual sexy smile. "Yeah," she said. "Thinking about the fundraiser tomorrow. Big day."

Evelyn tilted her head, clearly not buying it. "Right," she said gently. "That's it."

Not ready to discuss it further, Jo pushed open her door. "Come on," she said, tossing her jacket over her shoulder. "Let's go have fun."

Inside, Sapphire was already pulsing with life. The lighting was low, flashes of color moved across the dance floor. Music thudded from the speakers, the base so thick you could feel it in your stomach. Familiar faces turned toward them as they stepped inside.

"Jo!" someone called near the pool table. "I was starting to think you died or something."

Smiling, Jo offered a lazy wave. “Still kicking,” she said as another bar regular elbowed her friend and shot a teasing grin Jo’s way.

“Damn, Fuller,” she said. “Didn’t know you came with arm candy now.” Beside her, Jo felt Evelyn stiffen, and Jo grimaced internally as she steered them toward the bar counter.

Jess, behind the bar in a pink tank top, matching hair, and her signature eyeliner, let out a low whistle as she spotted Jo approaching. “Look who the cat dragged in,” she said, reaching for a glass out of habit. “The usual?”

“Yep,” Jo said quickly, and Jess looked at Evelyn.

“And for your lady?”

Unable to help herself, Jo flinched a little, and before she could answer, Evelyn stepped closer to the bar. “Cosmopolitan,” she said softly. “Thanks.” As Jess turned to make the drinks, Evelyn leaned closer to whisper in Jo’s ear. “Don’t worry. I’m not asking you to announce our relationship on the bar’s PA system.”

Jo nodded, grateful for Evelyn’s patience but even more grateful for the drink that arrived in her hand seconds later. “Thanks, Jess,” she said, slipping a bill over the counter.

Jess winked. “You better be back on the dance floor tonight,” she said over the music. “It’s not a Friday without you.”

Feeling a tug of anxiety in her stomach, Jo saluted with her beer. “Cheers to being infamous,” she said before they made their way through the crowd toward the high-top where Jasmine, Sophie, and Brooke already waited. Jasmine caught sight of them and waved enthusiastically. Evelyn waved back as she grabbed Jo’s hand to lead

them to the table. Forcing herself to go with it, Jo followed.

When they reached the table, Sophie gave a little whoop. “The guest of honor arrives.”

Jasmine pulled Evelyn into a hug. “I told them you wouldn’t miss a chance for a going-away party,” she said, then gave Jo a look. “Nice of you to escort her.”

Something about Jasmine’s gaze made Jo straighten. “Wouldn’t have missed it,” she said as the group shifted to make more room. Evelyn stayed close, and Jo didn’t pull away, but she felt it. That creeping anxiety again. The one that haunted her for the last two weeks. This is too much, she thought. Too domestic. Too final. Jo suddenly felt the edges of the room crowd in. The drinks, the music, the laughs of people who knew how she used to be. People who might still expect her to be that person. With Evelyn leaving in two days, tonight was the night Jo had to decide. Am I going to be the player Sapphire expects? Or am I going to be the partner Evelyn deserves?

Laughing, Brooke grabbed Sophie by the hand and spun her on the dancefloor. Both women giggled over something Evelyn hadn’t caught, but seeing them having fun made Evelyn feel good. Jasmine stood nearby, drink in hand, watching the scene with a small smile. Music pulsed through the club. It was loud. It was fun. And exactly what I needed tonight, she thought. Everything has been too intense. Still, even with the happy buzz of friendship and dancing, Evelyn couldn’t ignore the tension that whispered at the edge of her thoughts. Jo was beside her. Close, attentive, though not exactly warm, but not cold either. Just somewhere in between, and the in-between was starting to hurt.

Evelyn had told herself not to expect too much. She had reasoned through every possibility before she ever put on her dress tonight. She didn’t own Jo. She hadn’t asked for a promise. Hell, I haven’t even asked what she plans to do once I’m gone, she thought. Will she keep going to Sapphire every Friday? Evelyn’s eyes drifted to the

crowded dance floor. Will she go back to being the heartbreaker in the leather jacket with the sexy smiles and the irresistible charm? She shook the thoughts away as Mica appeared at their table holding a tray high above her head.

“Okay, I am officially that friend,” she announced, setting the tray down with a grin. “A shot for the going-away girl, and one for her emotional support entourage.”

“What exactly are we drinking?” Jasmine asked dubiously, picking up a golden shot glass.

“Something tropical, slightly toxic, and guaranteed to make you forgive bad dance moves,” Mica said, offering Evelyn a wink. “Bottoms up.”

Laughing despite herself, Evelyn accepted the shot and clinked glasses with the others. “To being brave,” she said, mostly to herself, then tipped it back. It was sweet at first, then burned all the way down. She coughed as she set the glass down. “I hope I don’t regret that in the morning.”

Jo chuckled beside her. “Maybe we’d better dance it off,” she said, and Evelyn met her gaze, that familiar flutter starting inside her.

Looking at Jo, Evelyn decided she wouldn’t let that comment go, and she wasn’t going to wait any longer for Jo to make a move. “Come with me,” she said softly, slipping her hand into Jo’s. Jo hesitated for the briefest second, then let Evelyn tug her from the table and onto the dance floor. The music wrapped around them. Bodies swayed and spun. Evelyn didn’t wait. Finding more courage than she ever imagined she had, she placed both hands on Jo’s shoulders and guided her closer.

Clearly liking the temporary change of who was in charge, a smile lit up Jo’s face, and she let her hands slide to Evelyn’s waist with practiced ease. Her thumbs moved lightly back and forth against the fabric above Evelyn’s hips. “Someone’s feeling

bold tonight,” she murmured, voice low, full of flirtation.

With a small smile and half-closed eyes, Evelyn leaned in so their bodies met fully.

“Maybe I’m trying to hold your attention for a little longer.”

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At the words, Jo's hands tightened a little and their hips fell into rhythm. One of Jo's hands slid up Evelyn's back, not quite teasing, but leaving a streak of heat in its wake. Evelyn was momentarily dizzy. Their faces were inches apart. The moment seemed to stand still, and then, like the DJ was in on the moment, the tempo shifted and a slower song came on. Not too slow, but sultry and Evelyn didn't hesitate. She pressed herself tighter to Jo and watched as the woman's face grew more serious. Her arms came around Evelyn without hesitation, sliding low on her body. Caught up in the moment, Evelyn rested her head on Jo's shoulder. It was exactly like that first night.

Suddenly, Jo pulled away a little, making Evelyn look into her face. Worry coursed through Evelyn. Is she going to walk away? she worried. Leave me standing on the dance floor? But then Jo leaned down and kissed her. Not softly. Not with coaxing. But like she had something to prove. Right there in the middle of the dance floor, beneath the lights and surrounded by bodies, Jo kissed her like they belonged together. Like she knew people were watching and didn't care.

Evelyn kissed her back fiercely, hands finding their way into Jo's hair, holding on like she never wanted to let go. And then—

The song changed.

Something fast exploded from the speakers and the crowd screamed with delight. A familiar anthem. One of those songs that required jumping and screaming out the lyrics. Sapphire's dance floor erupted around them. Brooke and Sophie descended from nowhere, grabbing Evelyn and pulling her into the chaos. "Come on," Brooke yelled.

“You can’t resist this one,” Sophie added, already spinning. Evelyn gave in with half a laugh, caught up in the tidal wave of her friends. When she turned again, breathless and slightly dazed, Jo hadn’t followed. She was back near the edge of the floor, sipping her beer. Evelyn smiled at her, and Jo smiled back, but there was something still a little different in her look. Not the distance like the last two weeks, but definitely cooler than their kiss moments before. What is she thinking? she wondered. Or more like, what is she feeling? There was no way to know yet, but Evelyn promised herself she would find out.

Twenty-Five

Driving them back across town, Jo hadn’t said much since they left Sapphire, but neither had Evelyn. The car was quiet except for the low hum of the GTO’s engine and the rhythmic click of the turn signal as Jo pulled onto Evelyn’s street. Turning into a parking spot, she hesitated for a beat but then shut off the engine. Evelyn turned her head, her profile soft in the light from a nearby streetlamp. In that moment, Jo thought she had never looked more beautiful. And she is smart, and funny, and wants to be with me, she thought. Why is this so hard?

“You okay?” Evelyn asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Jo said as confidently as she could. A beat passed.

Then Evelyn smiled. “Would you like to come up?” she asked, and Jo studied her face. The woman’s blue eyes were inviting but not demanding. There wasn’t pressure in her voice, only invitation.

Nodding, Jo smiled back. “Yeah,” she said, matching Evelyn’s tone. “I do.” They got out and crossed the sidewalk.

As they entered the building and started up the stairs, Evelyn gave her a look over her

shoulder, a half-smile, flirty but a little shy. “I was hoping you’d say yes,” she said. “I’ve missed alonetime with you.” Then, without another word, she started to climb, and after a beat, Jo followed. Halfway up, Evelyn stopped suddenly and turned again. Jo almost collided with her, but she didn’t mind one bit. Evelyn was one step above her, and the height difference brought their faces nearly even. She couldn’t miss the expectant look in Evelyn’s eyes, and determined not to overthink it, Jo didn’t hesitate and kissed her. Warm, open-mouthed, and lingering. One of her hands found Evelyn’s hip, anchoring them in place, while the other braced on the stair rail to stop herself from pushing forward too eagerly. Evelyn kissed her back, matching her passion, and the kiss deepened until Jo heard one of them moan. After a moment, Evelyn pulled back breathless. “God, you’re a good kisser.”

“So are you,” Jo said. “And I’ll be honest, I’ve been wanting to do that since you got in my car tonight.”

Evelyn leaned in to whisper in her ear. “You should have,” she said, before turning away and starting up the stairs again. They made it to the next landing before another kiss. A longer one. More urgent.

Not sure how much more she could take, Jo held Evelyn close. “If we keep stopping like this,” she said against her mouth. “We’re never going to make it.”

“Then stop stopping,” Evelyn whispered, and tugged her upward. By the time they reached Evelyn’s door, Jo had abandoned any pretense of restraint. All she wanted was Evelyn. The longing that had simmered between them all night had her on fire. Evelyn unlocked the door with shaking fingers, and they stepped inside a moment before Jo kicked it closed behind them without looking. Grabbing Evelyn, she pushed her against the inside of the door and kissed her hard. Evelyn melted into her, gasping softly, fingers locking behind Jo’s neck. Neither of them moved toward the bedroom, and Jo felt heat radiating from Evelyn’s body. It sent a surge of hunger through her. Sliding her thigh between Evelyn’s legs, Jo felt the short black dress ride up, letting

her press against the woman's center.

A moan escaped Evelyn's lips, making a pulse start low on Jo's body. "I want you so much," Jo murmured, her lips trailing down Evelyn's neck. She loved the way Evelyn's skin felt under her mouth, the taste of her, the scent of her perfume.

Evelyn's head fell back against the door, her body starting to tremble. "Then take me," she gasped, and Jo felt a surge of satisfaction in knowing how much the woman wanted her. Her hands found the hem of Evelyn's dress, pulling it higher, revealing more of her smooth skin. Evelyn gasped, and Jo couldn't get enough of the way Evelyn's body responded to her touch. Slowly, she brushed her fingers against Evelyn's thigh, then hooked them under the edge of her panties. She felt the heat of Evelyn's arousal, and it made her own need burn even hotter.

"Jo," Evelyn whispered, her voice barely audible, a plea and a promise all at once. "Please touch me."

In response, Jo let her fingers slipped inside Evelyn's panties, stroking her clit gently, making Evelyn whimper. Her hips bucked against the touch. Since the first time they slept together, Jo loved the sounds Evelyn made, and she wanted to hear more, to feel more. Her fingers moved in slow, deliberate circles, drawing out a moan from deep within Evelyn. With their bodies pressed together, Jo felt the tension building within the woman, her body coiling tighter and tighter with each stroke.

Jo suddenly realized she wanted to make Evelyn come, to give her the pleasure she deserved. "You're so wet," Jo murmured against Evelyn's lips, her voice husky. "So ready for me." Evelyn could only nod, her breath coming in short gasps. Unable to hold back, Jo slipped two fingers inside her and started to move them. With each stroke, she went faster, pressing deeper, and Evelyn's hips moved in time with her, grinding against Jo's hand. As Evelyn's body tightened around Jo's fingers, Jo felt the woman's pleasure building, her body on the edge of release, and it made her

own heart race with anticipation.

“So close,” Evelyn gasped, her nails digging into Jo’s shoulders. “So close...”

Jo’s thumb found Evelyn’s clit, circling it with exactly the right amount of pressure. Evelyn’s body tensed, her back arching off the door. She cried out with pleasure, and Jo held her tightly as she came. Drawing out every last wave of pleasure with her fingers, Jo was ready to catch the woman when her legs gave out. Looking at her, Jo wanted to memorize the moment, the look of bliss on Evelyn’s face, the sound of her ragged breaths. “You are so beautiful,” Jo whispered, and even through the haze of her own unfulfilled need, she couldn’t believe how much she wanted this woman, how much she cared for her. It was more than just physical attraction. It was deeper and something Jo had never felt with anyone else before.

“Mmm,” Evelyn hummed. “You make me feel beautiful in so many ways, but we’re not done.” Raising an eyebrow, Jo wasn’t sure what that meant, until suddenly Evelyn turned them until Jo’s back was against the door.

Evelyn couldn’t believe how alive her body felt, every nerve tingling with anticipation. She looked into Jo’s eyes, seeing the raw desire mirrored there, and it emboldened her. “I want to do something,” she whispered. “But I don’t want to do it wrong.”

Looking at her with half-closed eyes, Jo gave a slight shake of her head. “You won’t do it wrong,” she murmured. “Just do what comes naturally.”

“Okay,” Evelyn said, licking her lips, as her hands started to explore, tracing lines down Jo’s body, feeling the muscle through her thin denim shirt. Taking a deep breath, she moved to the front of Jo’s jeans, her fingers trembling slightly as she undid the button and zipper. Her heart pounded with a mix of excitement and nervousness. She had never tasted another woman before, but she wanted to please

Jo, to give her as much pleasure as Jo had given her.

Slipping her hand inside Jo's jeans, Evelyn found her center, already wet and hot. Jo moaned, her hips pushing against Evelyn's hand, and the sound sent a wave of heat through Evelyn. Going on instinct, she moved her fingers, exploring every inch of Jo's body, drawing out sounds from Jo that made her own body ache all over again.

"Is this okay?" Evelyn whispered, looking at Jo and seeing her eyes filled with want.

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Jo nodded. “Yes,” she growled. “It’s more than okay.”

Encouraged, Evelyn pulled down Jo’s jeans a little as she sank to her knees. She paused, looking up at Jo with a mixture of excitement and uncertainty. “I want to taste you,” she whispered, her voice husky.

Jo’s eyes were dark, her breath coming in short breaths, but she gently touched Evelyn’s hair. “Are you sure?” she asked. “You don’t have to do this.”

Evelyn could never have been surer. “Yes,” she said. “I want to. Can I?”

“Yes,” Jo said as she let her head fall back. “Please.”

Pressing forward, Evelyn’s mouth tasted Jo, her tongue exploring until she found the woman’s tight clit. Like Jo had done to her before, she teased and stroked, wanting to drive Jo to the edge. She felt the woman’s fingers tangling in her hair, holding on as if for dear life. Evelyn’s tongue moved faster, her mouth sucking and teasing Jo’s clit. She felt Jo’s body coiling tighter and tighter with each stroke, her moans growing louder, more desperate. “Jesus, Evelyn,” Jo moaned. “You’re making me crazy.”

Encouraged, Evelyn continued, driving her tongue deeper between the woman’s legs until she tasted all her wetness. She could not get enough, and when her lips returned to tease Jo’s clit Evelyn felt the woman’s body tense, her back shaking as the first waves of her orgasm crashed over her. Evelyn continued to suck, drawing out every last wave of pleasure until Jo’s body finally slowed and she reached to help Evelyn up. “You are incredible,” Jo said, her voice filled with wonder.

Evelyn smiled as a tingle ran through her. She had never felt so confident, so empowered. “Thank you,” she whispered as she snuggled against Jo’s shoulder.

She felt Jo chuckle. “I think I should be thanking you.”

After Evelyn disappeared into her bedroom to take off her dress, Jo crashed into the recliner to breathe. She couldn’t think at first. Not with the way her body hummed, not with the way her heart thudded a little too hard for something casual. That was not casual, she finally thought. It had never been casual. She ran a hand through her hair, damp with sweat and messy from Evelyn’s fingers as the reality of it all crashed over her. There was a spot in her heart where Evelyn lived, and Jo didn’t think she would ever be able to get rid of it.

A floorboard creaked, and Jo opened her eyes. Evelyn stood there in a light-blue robe. Tangled, flushed, soft-eyed, and smiling like she knew exactly what she had done. Jo’s heart thumped again. Evelyn walked over quietly and laid a hand lightly on Jo’s shoulder. “I could convince you to stay,” she said, voice low, eyes teasing. Jo grinned, ready to answer with something sexy or smart or both, but Evelyn shook her head before she could speak. “But you should go.”

Jo blinked. “Seriously?” she asked, and Evelyn nodded.

“Not because I want you to,” she said, stepping between Jo’s knees, and settling onto her lap. “Because you’ll sleep better at home. And because tomorrow is going to be huge.”

Exhaling, Jo knew she was right. The block party was waiting, and this perfect, blushing, brilliant woman sitting so perfectly on her lap was telling her to rest. It should’ve annoyed her. Instead, it made her fall harder. “Fine,” she said quietly. “But only because you told me to.”

Evelyn kissed her once, firm and warm. “I’m very persuasive,” she murmured, and Jo kissed her back. A moment before things grew too hot again, Evelyn peeled herself away and stood. Letting out a deep breath, Jo followed suit and turned for the door before she did something stupid like tell Evelyn everything she was thinking. I’m not ready for that, she thought. No matter how incredible she is.

“Goodnight,” she murmured instead. “See you tomorrow morning.”

With a smile, Evelyn nodded and opened the door. “Tomorrow morning,” she said as Jo passed her. “It will be great, Jo. I know it. And everything is going to be okay.”

Pausing before she started for the stairs, Jo let the words sink in. “Thank you,” she said. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“I know,” Evelyn said with a teasing smile. “Just remember that.”

Stealing a quick final kiss, Jo felt a weight lifting off her shoulders. “I think I will.”

Twenty-Six

Evelyn stood in the middle of the blocked-off street outside Fuller’s Auto Repair, clipboard in hand, checking her list. It was not quite ten-thirty in the morning, and the block party was supposed to start at noon. “All right,” she muttered, scribbling something next to Power cords for band stage — Jo? and circling it twice. “Let’s try not to panic.”

“Talking to yourself is fine,” Jasmine called from nearby. “As long as you don’t answer.”

Evelyn spun to find her sister at the edge of the garage bay entrance, teetering on the second-to-top rung of a ladder, a spool of fairy lights looped over her shoulder and a

stapler in her hand like a weapon.

“Very funny,” Evelyn replied. “Be careful and make sure those are high enough not to strangle somebody.” She turned to check Sophie’s lighting project. She was positioning another string of industrial-quality lights on a rented gaffer’s pole. “Sophie, put that three inches higher.”

Sophie groaned. “Three inches? Really?”

“I’m eyeballing symmetry,” Evelyn said with a nod. “And if you want your photo ops for the Pose with a Mechanic selfiestation to look good instead of something from a backyard prom, then yes, three inches.”

“I told you,” Jasmine called from the garage. “Put her in charge of anything and she’ll have us re-landscaping the block before lunch.”

“But can we all agree everything is looking perfect?” Sophie said, hands on hips, as she stood back and examined the work happening around her. “It’s giving the street a festive queer-market vibe.”

“As long as it is also giving a well-wired and OSHA-compliant vibe, I agree,” Evelyn muttered, checking another task on her clipboard as done while she walked to another station across the street.

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Brooke and Mica hunched over a folding table, arguing over the art on a chalkboard sign that read BE A MECHANIC FOR A DAY — \$20 DONATION. “Did you just draw abs?” Mica asked Brooke, squinting.

“I did,” Brooke replied proudly. “It’s a cartoon wrench with abs. Sexy wrench butch. Motivation.”

Mica raised one eyebrow. “You’re not gonna make me wear a tank top and flex for people, are you?”

“No promises,” Brooke said with a giggle.

Evelyn stifled a laugh and tried to keep things moving. “Hey, you two,” she called, striding toward them. “Abs or no abs, can we make sure the Venmo QR code is clearly labeled?”

“Logistics queen strikes again,” Brooke said.

“I prefer the term benevolent overlord,” Evelyn said dryly. Mica gave her a two-finger salute, but her gaze quickly returned to Brooke. It held there for a long beat before Mica shook her head and turned back to the sign. Hmmm, Evelyn thought. Is that flirting between them? She filed that away, not at all sure how she felt about one of her best friends and Mica.

She moved on. At the back of the parking lot, Rosa placed colorful bottles of different kinds of soda into a giant cooler filled with ice. Mr. Diaz stood beyond the table, near where the two giant barbecues were being set up, his arms crossed over his

chest, clearly supervising every move his sons made. “You know,” he called as Evelyn drew closer. “You may have missed your calling.”

“Oh?” she asked, stopping to stand beside him.

Mr. Diaz smiled. “You should be running a city,” he said. “Or an army.”

With a laugh, Evelyn shook her head. “Thank you,” she said. “But I’m not sure I’m ready for that. This is stressful enough.”

He gave her a sideways grin. “It’s going fine,” he said. “You and Jo and the team worked hard. Everything will go smoothly.”

Behind him, two men who looked a lot like Mr. Diaz maneuvered a second industrial grill into place. “Your sons?” Evelyn asked, and Mr. Diaz nodded.

“Yeah,” he said with a hint of pride. “Good kids. No idea how to marinate anything, but strong and good-looking like their mother.”

Evelyn smiled. “That’s all you really need,” she said, then hesitated. “Thanks again for helping with all of this. Paying for all the meat. Everything. I mean it.”

Mr. Diaz waved a hand. “Jo needed help,” he said. “She’s family. Like you are starting to be.”

Feeling a surge of unexpected emotion at his words, Evelyn swallowed. “Thank you,” she said, stepping away. “But before I get emotional in the street, I’m going to go check on the stage.”

“Tell Jo to plug the power strip into Bay One instead of Two,” Diaz added. “Those outlets are wired for more juice.”

“Got it.”

By the time she crossed to the street, Evelyn spotted Jo standing at the edge of the makeshift platform they had constructed near the front of the garage. Two connected risers, borrowed from a friend of Mica’s, were wide enough for a three-person band and a few stools. Jo had an extension cord in one hand and her phone wedged between her shoulder and ear, her brows furrowed as she listened, nodding. Evelyn walked up the ramp as Jo hung up.

“Talk to me,” Evelyn said. “You look stressed.”

Jo snorted a laugh. “Only a little. Acoustic amp’s shorting out,” she said. “The kid from the band said we can make it work by running an aux feed through the bass rig, but honestly...” She lowered her voice. “I don’t know. They’re nineteen and smell like weed and cheese fries so their credibility is a little suspect.”

“Well,” Evelyn said, stepping close and brushing a bit of dust from Jo’s cheek. “Good to know as long as they sound halfway decent.”

With a shrug, Jo looked down at her boots. “I don’t want this all to fall apart.”

“It won’t,” Evelyn said, touching Jo’s wrist. “And if it does, we’ll fix it on the fly.”

When Jo lifted her gaze, Evelyn saw gratitude mixed with nerves in her eyes. “Thank you,” she said. “I would never have been able to do this without you.”

Evelyn leaned in and kissed her gently. “You’re allowed to let people help,” Evelyn whispered before she pulled back. “Now plug that power cord into Bay One.” She smiled when Jo looked a little confused. “Mr. Diaz says it has more juice.”

Jo hadn’t sat down once in nearly five hours. Standing near the edge of the crowd,

beer in hand, she took in how her garage and all the space around it had been transformed into something else entirely. A proper street party. Music pumped through the air and the band that had shown up looking like they just crawled out of bed was actually pretty damn good. The lead singer had some pipes, and the bass player held a steady groove that had neighbors half-dancing in line for food. The grill station pumped out burgers and dogs so fast that they'd had to make another emergency run to the grocery store. Kids darted around clutching balloon animals and cotton candy. A face-painting booth had sprung up near the sidewalk thanks to one of Mica's cousins.

Next to the face-paint table, Mica and Brooke manned the community cornhole bracket like they were refereeing a world championship. Evelyn had managed to get one of the local breweries to donate prize growlers, and apparently that had heightened the stakes considerably. Everywhere she looked, people from the community were having a good time. And all of it, every detail, every glitter-sprinkled face and bit of string-light charm, was thanks to Evelyn.

Taking a sip of her beer, Jo caught sight of her near the raffle table, clipboard in one hand, laughing as she explained a silent auction to a woman wearing a cardigan with dogs wearing sunglasses on it. Evelyn looked amazing. Not dressed up like Sapphire nights but more casual in an olive tank top and cuffed jeans, with her ponytail messy at the nape of her neck. Jo's chest tightened, and she didn't try to stop it. She makes things happen, Jo thought. And she made people care about the shop.

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A part of her wanted to walk over and kiss Evelyn as a thank you for all of it, but she knew it wasn't the right time or the place. But there will be, she thought. Before she has to go on the road, and lots of times after that. The idea of a long-distance relationship didn't freak Jo out anymore. She knew that somehow, it would work.

Walking the edge of the party, Jo checked out the cornhole action and Mica slid away to meet her. "Wow," Mica said, beer in hand, surveying the street. "It's happening."

"You doubted me?" Jo smirked.

"Oh, every minute," Mica replied with a grin. "But then Evelyn rolled in like a hurricane, and now look, the block has become a smash hit."

Laughing, Jo nodded toward the large Venmo donation sign between the garage bays. "It's working, though. I glanced at the running total an hour ago and almost passed out. People are being more generous than I could imagine."

"That's amazing," Mica said, more serious now. "For real. You pulled it off."

"No," Jo said, her eyes back on Evelyn in the crowd. "She pulled it off." Before Mica could respond, Jo noticed something was happening at the far end of the crowd. A small commotion by the folding chairs that people had dragged beneath a few awnings for shade.

Jo had barely stepped forward when a slim woman who Jo guessed was in her late fifties emerged from the crowd. Her eyes were narrowed, shoulders set, and she did not look happy. "Excuse me," she said, her voice loud above the others. "Who is in

charge here?”

Oh boy, Jo thought with a sigh. Here we go. “Hi there. That would be me I guess,” she said, plastering on her best customer-service smile. “Welcome to the party.”

The woman pursed her lips. “This is very loud,” she said. “You do realize that?”

“Yes, a little,” Jo said gently. “That’s sort of the idea.”

“I live three buildings over,” the woman snapped, pointing east. “We’ve got a sleeping child and a husband on night shift. And it occurs to me that this whole... event,” she said, gesturing vaguely to organized chaos. “Might not have followed standard ordinance permits.”

Taking a slow breath, Jo kept her smile in place. “I understand,” she said. “And I’m really sorry if the noise is causing a problem.”

Crossing her arms, the woman raised one eyebrow. “I’m not trying to be a villain here,” she said. “The hamburgers look delicious. That’s a lovely art table. But I do feel obligated to file a formal complaint if this continues past four P.M. per noise regulations.”

Jo nodded calmly, calling up every ounce of diplomacy and charm she knew the situation demanded. “Okay,” she said, stepping a little closer, lowering her voice enough to be conversational. “You’re absolutely right. And if I’m honest, this wasn’t supposed to turn into a full-blown street fair. It started as a small block party to raise some donations. But...” She let the pause hang long enough for the woman to frown, clearly intrigued despite herself. Jo continued. “The reason I threw it is because I own that garage.” She nodded toward the sign. “I took it over from Mr. Diaz, a man who taught me everything I know. And a few weeks ago, I got robbed. A lot of my tools. Equipment. Things I can’t afford to replace. So this?” She motioned at the crowd.

“This is me trying not to lose the business I’ve poured years of my life into.”

Staring at Jo for a long moment, the woman’s indecision was clear on her face. “You were robbed,” she finally said. “And this is to save the garage. One that’s been in this neighborhood for decades.” Knowing better than to say too much and risk pushing the woman’s decision the wrong way, all Jo did was nod. The woman sighed. “Okay. This one time.”

Letting out a deep breath, Jo leaned in. “Thank you so much,” she said. “Tell you what. I’ll personally give your car a free oil change and full-service tire rotation whenever you want. You don’t even have to schedule it.”

At last, the woman smiled. “Fair enough,” she said, holding out her hand. “I’m Carol.”

Shaking Carol’s hand, Jo smiled. “Jo Fuller,” she said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Give my apologies to your family.”

“I will,” Carol said, turning to go. “Good luck.” Then, she went back into the crowd, and Jo ran a hand over her face. That was a close one, she thought, as she felt someone fall in beside her.

Turning, Jo saw Evelyn, hands on her hips, eyes searching her face. “Everything okay here?” she asked softly. “Did that woman have a problem?”

Nodding, Jo took Evelyn’s hand. “Yeah,” she said. “But I handled it.”

“You threatened her with Mica, didn’t you?” Evelyn asked without missing a beat.

“Nope,” Jo answered with a laugh. “Pure Fuller charm this time.”

Evelyn studied her for a moment and then leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. “Then she didn’t stand a chance,” she said into Jo’s ear. “Because you’re amazing.”

By the time sunset hit, the party had turned into something more than Evelyn could have imagined. Kids streaked past in face paint that looked increasingly like war paint as dusk settled over the lot. The band had broken down their gear and were now sitting cross-legged by Mr. Diaz’s grill, devouring hamburgers like they hadn’t eaten in a week. Rosa had switched from handing out hot dogs to distributing foil-wrapped leftovers she insisted people take. Over by Bay Two, Mica finished up taking payments for the silent auction. Brooke had parked herself beside her at some point, and Evelyn noticed how often their arms brushed. Definitely something happening there, she thought with a sigh. But I will deal with that later.

Sipping a plastic cup of cold cider, she scanned the rest of the space with a soft awe curling inside her, and she realized they had done it. Not just me, she thought. All of us. No corporate sponsors. No hired staff. Only people who gave a damn. People who showed up. Ready to facilitate shutting the whole show down, she turned toward the small stage only to see that Jo had climbed the few stairs to where the mic stand waited. She leaned into the mic like she didn’t entirely trust it and tapped it once. The sound crackled, then steadied. “Hi,” Jo said, shifting slightly. “Uh. Before everyone heads home, I wanted to say something.” She ran a hand through her hair. “I’m not great with speeches, so I’ll make it short.”

The crowd quieted, and Evelyn tilted her head. They had never talked about Jo giving a thank-you speech, so she was not sure what she was about to hear. She watched Jo take a deep breath. “Most of you know I took over this garage a few years ago from Mr. Diaz, who is...” She stopped, eyes scanning the crowd until they landed on him. “...still making me look bad at engine diagnostics and somehow hasn’t aged a damn day.”

People chuckled, and Mr. Diaz raised his drink in salute. Jo nodded, her voice

steadier. “We’ve seen a lot of cars through here. Some really busted up. Some only needing a little tender care. But the point is, this place has stood because of all of you.” Her voice quieted. “I wouldn’t have gotten through the last few weeks without people who care. This party and this support means more than I can probably say without getting awkward and weird.”

Warm and affectionate laughter rippled through the crowd, and Jo smiled. “And, uh... there’s someone who really made this happen.” She paused, looking over the crowd until her eyes met Evelyn’s. “And she’s leaving soon,” Jo continued. “But not forever.” Evelyn watched Jo take a deep breath. “She’s been real patient with me, plus taught me a few things, but mostly she’s helped me understand that you don’t have to give up who you are to let someone in.”

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Evelyn's breath caught. Then, with one quick smile, clearly meant for one pair of eyes, Jo stepped back from the mic and hopped down from the stage, as if she hadn't just filled Evelyn's heart with an unbelievable amount of joy. Around her, the clapping rose like a tide, but Evelyn stood still and knew that whatever unfolded ahead of them, she and Jo would find a way to work it out.

Epilogue

The hydraulic lift hissed as it lowered the silver Toyota back to the garage floor. Jo crouched beside it, checking the torque on the lug nuts one last time. "All right, she's good," she said, standing and giving the hood a firm pat. "Tell Mrs. Thompson she can stop worrying about her brakes squealing."

From the other side of the car, Mica wiped her hands on a rag, raising an eyebrow. "You sure you don't want to double-check the oil again?" she asked. "Maybe change the wiper blades? Stay a little longer?"

Jo snorted a laugh. "Very funny," she said. "And no, I don't."

"Oh, yeah?" Mica said with a wide grin. "What's the rush?"

Pointing a finger at her best friend, Jo shook her head. "You know exactly what," she said. "I want to make sure I don't smell like brake fluid when I go pick up my girlfriend from the airport."

"Ooh, girlfriend now," Mica said, waggling her brows. "Six months of FaceTiming and weekend rendezvous, and suddenly you're all soft."

Trying to act irritated, but failing because she knew Mica was right, Jo shot her a look. “I’m not soft.”

“Lies,” Mica said, coming around the car. “You’ve been a disaster since she left. A happy, weirdly productive disaster, but still.”

Jo didn’t deny it. The last six months had been... different. In a good way. She hadn’t gone to Sapphire more than a few times, and even then, only to show her face or meet up with Mica. No flirting, no dancing, no casual anything. She hadn’t wanted it.

Instead, most of her free time had been filled with Evelyn. FaceTime calls at all hours, some sweet and some red hot. Weekend visits whenever Evelyn wasn’t located too far away. Jo spent a lot of time learning to enjoy things Evelyn liked, such as hiking on beautiful forest trails and quiet dinners in small towns. In return, Evelyn always tried to find something to do on the weekends they were together that Jo would enjoy, like beer tasting at a local brewery or visiting an antique car museum. All in all, Jo was happy, even under the less-than-optimal circumstances.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Just over two hours until Evelyn’s flight from Sacramento landed. “I still need to shower and change,” Jo muttered, more to herself than to Mica. “And I’ve gotta get across town before traffic hits.”

“Then you better get going,” Mica said, clapping Jo on the shoulder. “Don’t forget to breathe and maybe eat something before you faint from excitement.”

“Thanks, Mica,” Jo said with a smile. “And I appreciate you closing up.”

Mica shrugged. “That’s what friends are for,” she said. “Now go get your lady, Casanova.”

Jo chuckled, but as she stepped into the back room, her chest filled with a quiet

anticipation. Evelyn was coming home. For good this time, she thought. No more weekends cut short, no more kisses over FaceTime. Just us. Slipping on her leather jacket, she smiled. And I can't wait to show her what I've been working on.

Pulling her carry-on through PDX's arrivals terminal, Evelyn walked through the milling crowds, eager to get to her destination. She tightened her grip on the handle, her heart fluttering with something that was nerves and joy all tangled together. Six months. That's how long it had been since she started the work assignment she had always dreamed of. Six months of airports and hotel rooms, of spreadsheets in conference centers and muddy boots at field sites. Six months of FaceTime calls with Jo that started with "miss you" and ended with "soon." Soon had finally arrived.

Feeling a buzz in her jacket pocket, Evelyn glanced at her phone. A text from Jasmine lit up the screen. "WELCOME HOME! We ALL missed you. Plants included."

Evelyn smiled and typed back a quick note. "Thanks. I can't wait to see ALL of you. Then she tucked the phone into her coat pocket and scanned the waiting area ahead. And there she was. Jo stood near the edge of the crowd, wearing a fitted black shirt that absolutely did not belong to any casual mechanic. Her leather jacket hung over one shoulder, her hair slightly tousled in that way Evelyn had always adored. She looked calm, confident, and impossibly good. Evelyn's heart skipped a beat.

Slowly, Jo's eyes met hers, and the smile that spread across her face was slow and warm and full of everything Evelyn had missed. Without thinking, Evelyn closed the distance between them, her carry-on forgotten for a second as she stepped into Jo's arms. Jo caught her easily, wrapping her in a hug. "Hey, stranger," Jo murmured into her hair. "Do I know you?"

Evelyn laughed, pulling back enough to see her face. "Maybe a little."

“That makes me pretty lucky then,” Jo said a moment before kissing Evelyn. The kiss was soft and sure, and Evelyn felt something inside her loosen. The tension of travel, of months away, of wondering if things would feel different when she came back. They will be different, she thought. But in the very best way.

Jo took the handle of her suitcase, and they headed for the parking garage. “You look good,” Evelyn said, bumping Jo’s shoulder affectionately.

“I feel good,” Jo replied as they walked across the skybridge. “Better now.”

As they passed the rows of cars, Jo stopped. Evelyn expected to see the GTO parked there, but instead, her eyes landed on something else entirely. The Mustang. Fully restored. It gleamed in the soft light with its cherry-red paint polished to a high shine. The lines were sleek, classic, and proud. The car looked like it had rolled straight off a movie set. Evelyn gasped. “Jo...”

Jo smiled. “Surprise.”

“You finished it,” Evelyn said, walking slowly around the front. “It’s so beautiful.”

“I had time,” Jo said with a shrug, though her voice was thick with pride. “And I figured you deserved a proper ride home.”

Evelyn turned to face her. “And this is what you did while I was gone?”

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Jo nodded. "Piece by piece. Took me a while to figure out what I was building it for." She paused. "Turns out, it was for this moment."

Feeling the hint of tears burn her eyes, Evelyn stepped into Jo's arms and kissed her. It was slow and sweet, but with the promise of something more. "You are amazing," she said once they broke apart.

"You are the amazing one," Jo said, and opened the passenger door with a flourish. "Your chariot awaits."

Evelyn slid into the seat, running her fingers over the leather interior. "It's all so perfect," she said. "The attention to detail is wonderful."

Settling behind the wheel, Jo smiled. "I have learned to appreciate the little things," she said. "And before I forget." She reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a small paper sack. "Here's a little something to say welcome home."

Already guessing what it was, Evelyn's throat tightened as she took the bag and opened it. Jo's wonderful chocolate chip cookies. She reached across the console, took Jo's hand, and whispered, "I'm home."

Jo squeezed her fingers. "Yeah," she said. "You are." As they pulled out of the garage, the Mustang purring beneath them, Evelyn held the hand of the woman she had fallen in love with. They still had a lot of things to learn about each other, but finally, there was time to do all of that. For now, the future was wide open, and Evelyn could not ask for more.

THE END