



Grimm County Wishes

Author: Cora Day

Category: Romance

Description: Be careful what you wish for... it just might come true.

When Al is offered big bucks to star in a reality dating show, he should be thrilled. After all, he's modeled for everything from underwear to cow manure to raise funds for his best friend, who's currently stuck in prison. There's just one problem: he's in love with his publicist, and she's not a contestant.

Although her own life has been far from charmed, Jeannie's earned a reputation for making her client's wishes come true. But her true motivation, freeing her brother, is never far from her mind. When his sexy best friend finally scores the deal they've been waiting for, she vows to forget their one night of passion in order to support America's most eligible deputy.

The show must go on, and Al struggles to do right by everyone but himself. But when a shady mogul sets his sights on a heartbroken Jeannie, can Al find a way to save his friend and his girl before he loses them both?

Grimm County Wishes is a modern day take on Aladdin. If you like your romance with a lot of laughs and a dash of danger, you'll love this friends to lovers finale of the Grimm County Lawmen Series.

NOTE: This book contains steamy scenes and salty language. All of the books in the series can be read as standalone, but if you enjoy a slow build to an eventual HEA, you may want to read this one in order.

Buy Grimm County Wishes today and enter a whole new world of handsome reality star deputies and HEAs.

Total Pages (Source): 64

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Prologue

“Twenty years! What the actual fuck?” Jeannie gripped the wooden partition separating her from her brother until her knuckles turned white. She’d known he would get some time, but this was too much. He couldn’t stay locked up for twenty years. Not her free-spirited, adrenaline junkie brother who spent most of his time surfing at the beach or racing his motorcycle through town. His dirty blond hair had already darkened several shades, a clear sign he now spent most of his time indoors.

The attorney zipped his briefcase closed and shrugged. “Sorry, ma’am. The judge had the discretion to sentence anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five years.” He briefly glanced up, and up, at his six-foot-three client, then shook his head. “There was nothing else I could have done.”

“Nothing else you could have done?” she whisper-shouted, struggling to control her temper lest she wind up in jail, too. “You could have done your job, you sorry-ass pieceof—”

“Jeannie, let it go.” The chain connecting Ben’s handcuffs to his waist clanked as he reached over to pry her fingers from the wooden barrier. His large hands engulfed hers and he frowned when he noticed how her nails had been chewed to the quick. “They found drugs in my car and bedroom. I don’t blame the jury for finding me guilty or how the judge sentenced me. It is what it is.”

“But it wasn’t yours!” Jeannie said, her eyes welling with tears.

“About that,” the lawyer said, his eyes darting over to the prosecutor’s desk. “A

person could request to have that evidence tested independently. It's not cheap. In fact, it's ridiculously expensive. But that's what the rich guys with private attorneys do, and sometimes they get lucky and those test results offer enough reasonable doubt to sway a jury."

"Then that's what we'll do." She nodded, a determined look on her face. "I know you didn't do this. I'll get you out of here, I promise." She wrapped her arms around him, bristling where his beard scratched her cheek. Another change. Where was the brother she'd teased relentlessly about his manscaping? If he'd changed this much in a few months, would she even recognize him after twenty years? As her tears began to fall, she gave him a final squeeze and ran from the courtroom.

Al sat in silence as Jeannie ran out, still in shock over his best friend's sentencing.

"Al, I've only got a few minutes before they take me back."

"Jesus, Ben." His voice cracked as he rubbed his eyes, desperate to remain strong for his friend. "I never should have left you that night. I'm so sorry."

"I'm not." Ben glanced at the waiting corrections officer and lowered his voice. "If you'd stayed, you'd be right here next to me. I may not have done most of what they said, but I'm far from innocent. Maybe it's karma catching up."

"Oh, Ben, you can't believe—" Al started.

"It doesn't matter what I believe. What matters now is Jeannie. You know our mother is useless." Ben closed his eyes and sighed. "You want to make it up to me? Get a real job. Play it straight so you can stay out there and keep an eye on my sister. Get her out of that trailer park and don't let any of those jacknuts she insists on dating hurt her."

Al grinned, thankful for the moment of levity. Jeannie was two years younger than they were, and at seventeen seemed to delight in going out with boys that she knew her brother would hate. But Ben was right. Without him, Jeannie wouldn't have anyone looking out for her.

"Don't worry." Al nodded, looking out into the empty hallway. "I've got her. And I've got you, too. We won't give up. We'll find a way to get you out of there."

Chapter 1

Several Years Later...

"You really didn't order any strippers?" Al's shoulders drooped as he slumped into his deck chair.

"Why would I?" Hunter asked, glancing up from behind the grill.

Al sighed loudly. The man might look like some airhead surfer dude with his shaggy blond hair and board shorts, but he was actually a genius and ran their crime lab. Did Al really need to spell it out?

"Because it's a bachelor party? Strippers are a requirement."

"Not when it's the sheriff's bachelor party and it's being held at a senator's beach house." Hunter flipped the steaks, letting the sizzling coals drown out Al's groan.

"That's no excuse. We could have gone to the strip club first and then come back here."

"But would a strip club have decorations like these?" Hunter pointed to the red and white balloons and strings of multi-colored lights that decorated his girlfriend's deck.

“Oh, you’re right. What was I thinking? Half-naked women dancing on stage have nothing on Christmas lights and a homemade balloon arch.”

“Hey, I worked hard on that arch! I went through half a page of calculations just to figure out the number of balloons.”

“And what a beautiful arch it is,” Christian said before draining the last of his beer from the bottle. “I’m sure the middle school would love to use it at their next dance.”

He walked across the deck and pulled another beer from the cooler. His dark blue button-down shirt and khaki slacks were a little stuffy for a backyard party, but that was Christian. Al called it “sheriff chic.”

Hunter folded his arms across his chest, covering his “Kiss the Nerd” apron. “Okay, assholes. Make fun of my decorations. But with Congress in session, Snow has been stuck in DC. I had to find some way to fill my time. Crafting is fun.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“And for the record,” Christian added, “I didn’t want strippers. I’ve only got eyes for my future wife and have no interest in the drama we’d get if we brought in strippers.”

Christian had a point. Besides being the local law enforcement, they also spent several weeks every year taping the reality show Grimm County Lawmen. They had their fair share of crazed fans, nicknamed Grimboes. There was no telling what one of them might do to get naked in front of their favorite sheriff. But still ...

“The girls hired a stripper,” Al said.

“The fuck did you say?” Nick stood up and glared at Al. Not known for his social skills, the chief deputy had been nursing his beer in the corner.

“Oh, you heard me, Beast.” Al snickered. “The girls. Hired. A stripper.” Al knew this for a fact. Jeannie, his best friend and publicist, was in charge of Marina’s bachelorette party.

Christian shrugged. “I’m not surprised. Marina’s been binge watching wedding movies for the last month. I think she would have been heartbroken if she didn’t get that stereotypical party. But let’s be real. We know this town and everyone in it. Whoever Jeannie finds to strip won’t hold a candle to the Lawmen of Grimm County.”

“Here! Here!” Hunter cheered, clanking his bottle against Christian’s.

“Easy for you to say,” Nick grumbled. “Your woman is out of town.”

Hunter laughed. “She’s coming back tonight. Besides, your woman is your wife, and she’s about to pop out a kid in less than a month.”

“True.” Nick’s face softened and a dreamy look crossed his face. Rose really had tamed the beast, so much so that he barely lived up to his nickname anymore. Although Al suspected there had always been a pile of mush underneath all that grump. Nick had just needed someone to dig it out. Rose did that for him, and a lot more, given the swell of her belly.

“Steaks are done,” Hunter announced. “I’ll grab the rest of the food and we’ll be ready to eat. My mom sent over her famous potato salad.”

Though Al wouldn’t admit it out loud, Hunter had done a nice job decorating. The Christmas lights gave it a homey bistro vibe, and he’d even added outdoor heaters so they wouldn’t freeze while eating. February in North Carolina was still February. But the view of the ocean a couple hundred feet away could not be beaten, and the music was pretty good. They were just missing the strippers.

It was no surprise that none of the other guys cared about that since they’d all coupled up in the last year. There must have been something in the water. Unfortunately, Al missed out on that because he only drank Bula Water as part of an endorsement deal. While those three guys had warm hearts and beds, Al had a dresser full of Bula Water T-shirts and a hundred extra dollars every time he posted a picture drinking their product.

“Heard Al’s going to be a TV gigolo.” Nick stabbed at a piece of steak.

Al tightened his grip on his fork and swallowed. “Gigolos are like dude prostitutes. I’ve been offered the lead on a new dating show called Law of Attraction. There’s a difference.”

Hunter grinned. “Is there, though? You are getting paid, right?”

Al lifted his middle finger and took a swig of his beer. “I do get paid to be on the show, but we also get paid to be on Grimm County Lawmen. It’s the same thing.”

Christian jerked his head back. “It most definitely is not the same thing. We get filmed doing our regular jobs. You’re getting filmed to fuck around.”

“Gigolo,” Nick repeated with a nod.

Al moved the potatoes around on his plate. They weren’t wrong. He was, essentially, being paid to date a bunch of women. Possibly fuck a few of them and eventually propose to one. That seemed pretty close to the definition of a gigolo. He’d have to check with Jeannie later.

He shrugged. “I haven’t signed the contract yet. I might not do it.”

Christian glanced around the table. “Seriously? I thought this was what you wanted all along, to have your own show. Why wouldn’t you do it?”

Why indeed? It was no secret that Al joined the sheriff’s office because they were starting the reality show. It had been a big step in Jeannie’s grand plan.

About seven years ago, her brother was sent to prison for a crime he didn’t commit. Al had been there, too, but when the cops came, he got away and Ben didn’t. What should have been a few months of probation for possession of stolen property somehow turned into drug trafficking and twenty years.

Jeannie and Al had dedicated themselves to raising money to hire a new attorney. Unfortunately, they were past the deadline for appeals, so they needed someone who was really good. And that meant really expensive.

They soon realized bagging groceries wouldn't earn the kind of money they needed. After watching too many episodes of America's Next Top Model, Jeannie came up with a new plan. Al's dark hair and chocolate-colored eyes combined with his outgoing personality had always made him the center of attention growing up. But once his soft angles turned chiseled, and he filled out his six-foot-two frame with solid muscle, Jeannie pushed him to down a new path.

He modeled in a few underwear ads and starred in a couple of commercials for local businesses. The work was easy and paid well, but it was inconsistent. When the reality show came to town, Jeannie figured that was their ticket to booking more jobs. And she was right. When that first season aired, he was overwhelmed with new gigs.

After losing the first ten grand they'd saved to a lawyer who did nothing but send emails about how hard he was working, they'd done their research and found the best defense lawyer in North Carolina.

Jeannie was already an expert in social media and named herself his publicist. Every day, she worked the social media platforms to boost his popularity, hoping to get him his own show. And it had finally paid off. He only wished it didn't have to be a dating show.

"Well, y'all know I took a break from dating after the pube-theft incident." Al shivered at the memory. When the show became popular, Grimbos descended into the town. He had his pick of women, and since most were tourists, none were interested in a long-term relationship which was perfect for him.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Until Corrina had to ruin it all. He'd only been with her one night, but when he woke up, she was cutting off his pubes to put in a vial around her neck. That was over a year ago, and it was also the last time he'd had sex. He'd sworn off Grimbos, which left only the local girls. And having grown up in the town, there weren't any local girls he wanted to be with. Well, maybe one. "Anyway, I'm out of practice, and I don't want to be with a bunch of strange women."

"I'm sure the show will vet the contestants thoroughly," Hunter said. "And if they don't, slip me their names. I can run background checks for you."

"I probably shouldn't be hearing this." Christian crossed his arms over his chest.

"Oh right." Hunter pointed toward the ocean. "Christian, look at the waves! I think I see a dolphin."

Christian rolled his eyes and turned away from the table. Hunter mouthed to Al, "I got you," and gave him a thumbs up.

"That's only if I sign the contract. I might not."

"You like women. You like money," Nick grunted, rubbing his giant hand along his beard. "No brainer, right?" he asked, lifting one of his thick eyebrows.

"Right. Yeah. Totally." It's not like the one woman he was actually kinda-sorta-maybe-just a little bit interested in dating was ever going to see him as anything other than her best friend.

Chapter 2

“Good evening!” Jeannie shouted into the mic from the small stage of Susie’s Bar. Her signature blonde ponytail sat high on her head, and she wore a bright pink crop top with the words Maid of Honor plastered across her chest. “I’m here with a few friends to celebrate my girl Marina locking down the town sheriff.” A mixture of cheers and a few boos filled the room. Jeannie rolled her eyes and flipped her middle finger at the table of women in the back corner. Not everyone was happy the sheriff was going off the market. As if those Grimbos ever had a chance.

“Anyway, I know this isn’t the typical entertainment for Susie’s, but this is a bachelorette party, so ...” Jeannie trailed off as the music changed to “Pony” by Ginuwine. A man in a tan trench coat strolled onto the stage, his face covered with a large cowboy hat. “Just remember, it’s the thought that counts!” Jeannie shouted as she ran off stage and back to her table with Marina, Rose, and Ms. June, who was also Christian’s aunt.

“Yeah, baby!” Marina stood up on shaky legs and raised her arms in the air. Jeannie would need to keep an eye on her. Marina couldn’t hold her alcohol, and Jeannie would hate for her to be hungover on her wedding day.

“J, what did you mean by that?” Rose winced as she leaned closer to Jeannie, not making much progress because of her large belly. No doubt the poor woman would birth a ten-pound baby with Nick as the father. Jeannie shuddered and crossed her legs.

“Uh, well, what happened was,” Jeannie paused and bit her bottom lip, “I booked the guys from the Ocracoke Revue, but their van blew a head gasket and they bailed at the last minute. I knew Marina would be heartbroken without at least one stripper, so, I uh, improvised.”

The stripper was facing the wall, his back to the audience as he grooved in time with the music.

“He’s kind of short, but that’s okay,” Marina said. “As long as he’s got the right moves.” She adjusted her bridesash and repositioned the tiara on top of her brown waves as she danced.

A loud commotion came from the back of the room, and they turned to see Snow racing in. “Oh, thank goodness. I was worried I’d miss the good part! I couldn’t leave DC before they took the vote on the education bill and, boy, can those people talk.” She hugged each of the girls before pouring herself a glass from the margarita pitcher.

Jeannie still found it hard to believe that her friend was a freaking U.S. senator. Not that Snow wasn’t capable. She was the kindest, most considerate and compassionate person Jeannie knew. It was more that Jeannie, the girl from the wrong side of the tracks, was good friends with someone so important.

“Wait a second.” Marina squinted as she stared at the stage.

Jeannie looked up and saw that the stripper had tossed his hat across the bar. Ah well. He could only stall for so long.

Rose turned to look at Jeannie. “Please tell me you did not hire—”

It was at that moment that the stripper turned around with his trench coat open wide.

“Goddammit, Dad!” Susie shouted from behind the bar. Marina laughed wildly and continued dancing, barely phased by the surprise.

Mr. Bill was in his eighties and the town’s resident nudist. It was illegal for sure, but

he had an understanding with the sheriff to keep it in his yard. Which was great for the town, but not so much for Christian who lived across the street.

Rose raised an eyebrow at Jeannie, who shrugged.

“I did what I had to. Marina wanted a stripper. I got her a stripper.”

Mr. Bill continued his dance, tossing his coat to the side and strutting around in a gold G-string.

“Get it, Mr. Bill!” Marina shouted.

Ms. June shook her head and sipped her margarita. “To think I once had a crush on him.”

Snow laughed. “No way! You liked Mr. Bill?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“For about five seconds when I was too young to know better,” Ms. June said.

Mr. Bill finished his dance and walked over to Marina. “Congratulations, girlie! And any time your man falls down on his job, you come right on over. As you saw, I’ve still got the moves to keep you satisfied.”

Marina laughed and squeezed his hand. “You got it! Thanks for coming to my bachelorette party.”

“Anything for you, sweetheart. Oh, hell.” Something had caught his eye over Marina’s shoulder. “Susie’s coming this way with my coat. You’d think my own daughter would want me to live my truth, but she’s a prude like the rest of them. I better go before she covers me.” Mr. Bill walked away, leaving the women to their margaritas and appetizers.

Snow cleared her throat. “Now, Jeannie, what’s this I hear about Al getting a dating show? That’s awesome they’re filming locally. Having another show in town will be great for the economy. How’d you convince them to do it here instead of LA or somewhere flashier?”

“It wasn’t that hard, actually.” Jeannie flipped her hair over her shoulder. “They liked Al because of his job as a deputy and his work on Grimm County Lawmen, so filming locally made sense. And the Lawmen team was more than willing to push back their filming schedule since they expect Bachelor Al will add a ton of new viewers.”

“I’m curious about the women,” Marina said, her eyes lighting up. “Do you know anything about them?”

“No, I’m not really involved with that part.” An uncomfortable knot formed in Jeannie’s belly. “I just know they’ll start with ten and go from there.” The truth was, they had asked her to assist with the casting. Even offered to fly her out to New York City. But so far, she’d declined, not interested in seeing who Al would date.

“Maybe you could be one of them.” Marina pulled a cheese fry out of the pile. A hush fell over the table as she continued to stuff her cheeks, oblivious to the awkward bomb she’d dropped.

“What?” Marina asked through a mouthful of food.

“Why would I go on the show as one of Al’s harem?”

“As a spy? Duh. It’s been done before. You pose as one of the girls and give Al the real scoop on how they act when he’s not around.”

Jeannie released a long breath. Of course she didn’t want to be one of Al’s women. So what if maybe sometimes on occasion she imagined what it might be like to be his. And it was totally irrelevant that most of those occasions were while she was in the shower with a certain battery-operated friend. But those daydreams had her as his woman, singular. Not one woman out of many competing for his attention. Which she would never get because he only saw her as a friend.

She sighed and shook her head. “My job was to boost his profile enough to book a show. I did that. Now it’s up to Al to sign the contract and do everything else.”

“Wait, he hasn’t signed yet? I thought you got the offer weeks ago,” Rose said, rubbing her stomach.

“We did, but these things take time.” Jeannie hoped she sounded truthful. In fact, Al had been offered an exceptional deal, and he should have signed it last week. But he

was stalling, and she didn't know why.

Snow reached over and pulled a large chunk of fries away from Marina. "Good for Al for being cautious and reviewing the fine print. My dad had horror stories from his time as a lawyer when clients rushed through a deal."

Maybe Snow was right. Maybe Al was trying to be thorough. But Jeannie had read that contract over with a fine-tooth comb. Filming would take six weeks, and they'd worked it out with Christian so that he could take vacation days when necessary. When combined with the rest of their savings, the sign-on bonus was enough to cover the initial payment for the lawyer they wanted to hire for Ben. And when he finished the show, he'd have the rest of the money they needed.

There was only that one clause that was a little unusual, but not surprising, considering the theme of the show. He wasn't allowed to date anyone other than the ten contestants for the duration of filming. If he did, he would be in breach of contract and not only would he be fired, he wouldn't get paid. And if he was caught dating outside the show more than halfway through production, he'd have to pay a twenty thousand dollar fine. But surely that wasn't the reason Al was stalling. She hadn't seen any ladies on his side of the duplex lately, so it's not like he was holding out for someone else.

Chapter 3

Al stood at the front of the church, feeling uncharacteristically anxious in front of the sea of guests. He'd made quite the leap from teenage thief to sheriff's groomsman. His mother would have gotten a kick out of that, if she was sober. Al hadn't seen her in years. When he refused to give her money for her drug habit, she told him she didn't want anything to do with him. Fine by him. He'd stopped looking to her as a mother when he started buying his own groceries at ten years old.

Christian stared down the aisle patiently, his face shining with love for his bride. Pachelbel's "Canon in D" played softly as the doors opened. Jeannie was the first to walk down the aisle, and Al nearly swallowed his tongue as he drank her in. The strapless turquoise dress hugged her curves in all the right ways, showing just enough cleavage to make his heart race. The skirt ran all the way to the floor, draping her like an elegant princess. Her honey-rich hair was piled on her head in some kind of fancy updo, and his fingers itched to pull out the pins and let her hair fall against—

Old garbage. Nursing homes. Gutting fish. He needed to think of something, anything, to distract Al Junior, who had decided to stand up for the wedding.

Rose walked down the aisle next, followed by Snow. Al glanced at Nick and Hunter's faces, finding similar sappy expressions on each. The music changed to "Here Comes the Bride," and this time, Marina stood at the entrance.

With no parents to walk her down the aisle, Marina chose to walk by herself. Christian had told them she'd toyed with the idea of asking Sofia, her sort-of stepmother, but he vetoed it. He was willing to give Marina the world but drew the line at having the head of the Romano crime family in his wedding.

Al watched as Christian's hand moved up to wipe a tear from his cheek. The love he had for Marina, hell, the love all the deputies had for their women, was a foreign concept to Al. His mom had been a literal crackwhore, which left him with no clue about his father.

Ben and Jeannie's parents weren't much better. Their dad had been sentenced to life in prison when Jeannie was in kindergarten. After he was killed in a prison fight, their mom started dating around like it was her new job.

The three of them were already used to taking care of themselves, so her inattention didn't make a big difference. Ben had inherited the trailer from his father, so they

didn't need to worry about becoming homeless whenever their mom decided to stay with her latest beau. Jeannie could fake her mom's signature and voice when needed. They knew the best food pantries, and Ben and Al could steal whatever else.

Al snorted when he remembered the year Jeannie started her period. She stole as many pads as she could from the bathrooms at school, but eventually had to ask them for help. Ben was horrified, but Al didn't mind. It wasn't any different from them stealing toilet paper or deodorant. They could have afforded the off-brand kind, but he figured lady products were important enough that he wanted to steal the best.

Thank fuck. His hard on was finally gone. He'd have to remember to add period products to his list of deflation visualization aides.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Marina made it to the front of the church and stood next to Christian.

“You look beautiful, princess.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

Christian leaned down to kiss her when the minister cleared his throat. “Not yet, Sheriff.”

Christian sighed and straightened back up. “Then let’s get on with it.”

Marina giggled and linked her arm in his.

The service began, and it wasn’t much different from any other wedding Al had been to over the years. His focus drifted back to Jeannie. Her blue eyes softened when she caught his glance, and she gave him a smile. As he continued to stare, her eyebrows furrowed as she tried to give him a subtle nod toward Marina and Christian. Al shrugged, biting his lip as he looked her body up and down. She rolled her eyes, and Al had to stifle a laugh when he noticed her tapping her middle finger against her bouquet.

A few years after Ben went away, they’d saved up enough money to move out of the trailer park and into a much safer duplex. She resisted at first, hating to spend the extra money on anything but Ben. But after Ben threatened to cut off her visits if she didn’t move, she finally relented. Al lived on the A side; she had the B side. They hung out most nights, unless one of them had a date. Then they’d hang out at breakfast and rehash the night’s events.

But something had shifted over the last year. Waking up to someone holding a pair of scissors next to his dick had caused him to re-evaluate his life's choices. Hunter had assured him that Carina couldn't create clones from his pubes, but still. It was time to grow up. As he watched Christian fall in love, followed by Nick and then Hunter, he realized that healthy, stable relationships did exist. And maybe he wanted one too.

"With this ring, I thee wed." Marina's voice was strong as she spoke her vows.

A blush spread over Jeannie's cheeks as Al held her gaze while Marina and Christian recited their vows of love and devotion. Visions of Jeannie saying those words in a white lacy dress flashed in his mind.

He blew her a kiss and winked, falling back on his usual charm to defuse the growing tension. Jeannie rolled her eyes and mouthed "Asshole." His shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

The church erupted in cheers as Christian bent his wife backward with a deep kiss. They finally came up for air and began the procession down the aisle. If Al thought Christian looked happy before, it was nothing compared to this moment.

He stepped out of order and reached for Jeannie's arm. With Jeannie as maid of honor and Hunter as best man, those two were supposed to walk down the aisle together, leaving Al to walk with Snow. But Hunter still felt a littlesalty that Al had taken Snow to prom—even though it was a million years ago—so Al agreed to trade spots with him.

It had nothing to do with the fact that Al wanted to walk down the aisle next to Jeannie. Nothing at all.

Chapter 4

Jeannie smiled as she entered the reception hall with Al by her side. She loved weddings, but she also found them a little depressing. They were full of love, hope, and joy. Three things that had been sorely lacking in her own family. Every time she attended a wedding, she was reminded that, for some people, this was their story. Not neglect, instability, and rejection.

She felt a squeeze on her arm and looked up at Al. Soft lips brushed against her forehead and he sighed. “I know, Jeannie-girl. I know.”

And he did. They had grown up in the trailer park with equally shitty parents, raising themselves when they should have been climbing trees and making mud pies. There wasn’t another soul on earth that knew her as well as Al, except maybe her brother Ben. But since he’d been locked up, they’d only been able to see each other once a month. And there was only so much you could share in an hour.

About six months ago, she’d been in a car accident and ended up with a concussion. Al had completely freaked out and mother-henned her for weeks until she got the all-clear from the doctor. Although she’d never admit it, she had enjoyed his attention. Their relationship had slowly evolved from brother-sister to best friends to ... something she didn’t want to label.

They used to laugh about their adventures in dating. Jeannie had even encouraged it. The more stories that were posted about Al, the better. By dating Grimbos, he let the fans know he was attainable, a dream they could achieve and not just some personality they followed on social media.

And now Al was finally right where they wanted him. On the cusp of a television deal that would put him on the map permanently. After this, he’d be up for Dancing with the Stars or Running Wild with Bear Grylls. They’d get Ben free, set him up with

whatever he wanted to make up for his time away, and then they'd get the fuck out of this stupid town.

Her heart ached a little at that last thought. Leaving Grimm had been the goal since they were teenagers. But oddly enough, once Al joined the sheriff's office, things settled down. It's amazing what a steady income will do for a person's psyche. And while the anonymity of a bigger city would be nice, she'd miss the friends she made here. Miss her clients that she did marketing for. Miss the familiarity.

She shook her head to stop her train of thought. This was a wedding. A party. And no one would ever call her a Debbie Downer.

They sat down at the table for dinner. Jeannie took out her phone and snapped pictures of everyone's meals.

Al placed his arm around her shoulder. "Don't forget to take one of us, too." His finger danced along the side of her arm, sending shockwaves through her system.

She took a sip of wine to calm her nerves. "Don't you have enough pictures of us already? Surely you don't need one more."

"Oh, Jeannie-girl." His breath was hot along her neck. "I could never get enough of you."

Jeannie squirmed in her seat, seeking relief for her lady bits. Gah, what this man could do to her without even trying. She cleared her throat and quickly took their selfie, then turned to Rose.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Your dad outdid himself tonight. The food is delicious. I’ve been trying to convince him to take me on to promote the restaurant. Whenever I mention it, he talks in French and disappears.”

Rose laughed. “That sounds about right, but I’ll see if I can convince him to listen.” She sucked in a breath and clutched her stomach.

“The fuck was that?” Nick bellowed.

“The fuck was what?” Al asked, looking around the room.

“Talk to me, Rose.” Nick placed his hand on the back of her neck as she took several deep breaths.

“Holy shitballs, girl.” Jeannie reached up and clutched Al’s hand, still resting on her shoulder. “Are you fixing to have that baby right now? Like right fucking now?”

Rose bit her lip as she took a deep breath. “No, my contractions are only five minutes apart.”

“Oh hell yeah!” Al kissed Jeannie’s hand lightly before jumping up and stripping off his jacket.

“I’ve been a deputy for three years and haven’t delivered a baby yet. But don’t worry, hon. I watched the training videos, and I am so ready for it. Jeannie, go boil a pot of water. Hunter, get me some towels.” He unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves to reveal sexy as fuck forearms. “Take deep breaths and stay calm. Dr. Al is

here for you and will catch that baby.”

“Not putting your hands under my wife’s dress.” If looks could kill, Al would have been a pile of ash.

“Ease up, Beast. This is strictly professional. How do you think they did it in caveman days?”

Snow snickered and buried her head in Hunter’s shoulder, who hadn’t moved to grab the towels.

“Enough!” Rose shouted. “I’ve already texted my midwife. We’re fine. I mean, we should probably head to the hospital now, but I’m not about to have the baby right here on the floor.”

“Bummer,” Al mumbled. “Maybe next time, yeah?”

Nick glared at him as he pulled Rose to his side. “Fuck off, pretty boy.”

“Do you want us to come with you?” Snow asked.

“No,” Rose answered. “You all stay, enjoy the reception. I only want Nick with me in the delivery room, which would leave you all waiting in the lobby. You might as well stay here and enjoy the food and drinks. We’ll call you when it’s time to visit the baby.”

Jeannie squealed and clapped her hands. Everyone at the table turned and stared. “What? It’s exciting. This is the first baby in our friend group.”

The DJ came over the loudspeaker and announced the first dance with the bride and groom. Rose groaned again, squeezing her eyes closed. “Okay, babe. That’s our cue.

We'll see you all later. Give Marina and Christian our love."

Nick looked around the table and grinned. "I'm gonna be a dad."

"Hell yeah, you are!" Jeannie shouted. "Go get that baby, big guy!" As they watched the couple leave the room, Jeannie raised her glass. "To an easy birth and a healthy mama!"

They watched as Marina and Christian finished their first dance as husband and wife to "At Last" by Etta James. As the floor opened up, Christian turned to dance with his Aunt June, and Marina danced with Mr. Bill.

"My lady." Al reached out a hand to Jeannie.

"Oh, why thank you good sir," she said and set her wine glass on the table. They'd danced plenty of times together. Nothing new to see here.

Except for some reason, this felt new. Different. The song was "Perfect" by Ed Sheeran. Of course it was. Falling in love before they knew what love was? Yeah, that sounded about right.

She stared up at him, her eyes drawn to his lips as he softly sang the words. Butterflies filled her stomach, and she couldn't blame the flush in her cheeks on the alcohol. Al's body was hard beneath his tux. She'd seen him in his underwear more times than she could count. When they ran together in the mornings, he wore itty bitty shorts that left little to the imagination. But knowing what was under those clothes was different than feeling it. She pressed up against him, taking full advantage of the moment.

There was only one more thing that could make the night perfect.

Chapter 5

Al wasn't Catholic. He was barely Presbyterian. If someone had asked him how a person was elevated to sainthood, he couldn't have offered the first guess. But after tonight, he had a pretty good idea. Dancing with the hottest chick in the world and not taking her to bed? That had to be criteria for sainthood.

The song changed to a more upbeat tune. Jeannie's body was plastered against his, grinding in time to the music. His cock swelled, and no amount of deflation visualization was going to help. Not when her body was separated from his by a thin wisp of fabric. He could feel her hard nipples against his chest.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

She twisted around, her ass now pressed against his groin. There was no hiding his erection now, and he didn't care. His hands slid up and down her body, resting on her hips to keep her close, then running up her body when he could no longer stand not touching every inch of her.

She dipped low, bending her knees to the ground, then turned back around to face him as she slowly slid back up his body.

Fuck, this was a bad idea, but he couldn't make himself care. He rested his forehead against hers. "I thought we might get too drunk to drive home, so I booked us a room. Wanna check it out, Jeanine?" They always used full names when they were serious.

A sheen of sweat covered her brow, and she licked her lips. "Heck yeah, Aloysius."

A large grin spread across his face. Fuck the consequences. Fuck tomorrow. Fuck it all, especially him and the woman next to him.

He grabbed her hand, and they made their way through the throng of people on the dance floor. Christian wasn't much of a dancer. He swayed like a pole in the breeze, but Marina didn't seem to mind. She had enough dancing energy for them both. Hunter and Snow were doing some kind of professional looking ballroom shit. He'd have to find out where Hunter trained. When Dancing with the Stars called, he didn't want to go home the first week.

They reached the elevator, and Al pressed the up button with his free hand. They stared at the lights above the door, watching as the light moved down the floor numbers. Imagining all the things he wanted to do had his cock hard as granite. Over a

year of pent-up sexual energy had him ready to explode. Not to mention the feelings that had been building for her during that time. Yeah, definitely not mentioning those.

The door opened to an empty car. They stepped inside and Al pushed the button for the sixth floor. Less than a minute to go and—

The second the doors closed, Jeannie was on him. She grabbed him by the hair and pulled his lips to hers. Their first kiss was not sweet or gentle. It was hard, raw, and fucking amazing.

Their tongues met in a violent clash as he pulled her body against his. Her moans filled the small space as he pushed her against the wall, his body thrusting against her. Before he could dry hump her and completely embarrass himself, the elevator dinged and the doors opened again.

“This is us, squirt.”

“Squirt?” Jeannie pulled back, her lips looking beautifully swollen. “You haven’t called me that since elementary school.”

“Well, I’m hoping after tonight I’ll have a new reason to call you that.”

Jeannie laughed and pulled him out of the elevator. “Better not keep me waiting then,” she teased.

They raced down the hall to room six thirty-eight. The room was a standard king with a small kitchenette. Did he ask for one bed? No. But did he ask to change to a room with two queens when he found out? Also no.

“Wait, we can’t do this,” Jeannie said, a frown on her face.

“Why the fuck not?” Al asked, his heart stopping.

“Tomorrow is visiting day. We need to leave early to make it to Central Prison by ten. I certainly can’t wear this.” Jeannie waved at her bridesmaid dress.

He breathed a sigh of relief. She meant they couldn’t stay at the hotel. Not that they couldn’t fuck.

“I got you covered, babe. I grabbed a bag of your stuff before I left this evening.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Al shrugged. They might live on separate sides of the duplex, but they knew each other’s space as well as their own. He knew what Jeannie needed and where she kept it. He had no doubt she could pack an overnight bag for him just as easily.

“So, you had this all planned out?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “I don’t know if I should be creeped out or impressed.”

“Well, if you’re not impressed, I can show you something that will definitely get you there.”

Jeannie laughed again. “Okay. Impressed it is. I’m glad you were looking out for us. Making sure we had a safe place to sleep it off and wouldn’t miss seeing Ben in the morning was really thoughtful.”

“Don’t you know by now, Jeannie? I’ve always got your back.”

Chapter 6

The heat raging inside Jeannie had cooled slightly when she thought of visiting her

brother. He was only a couple of years older than her, but he'd cared for her more than her parents did.

But then he was gone, and Al never left her side. Al projected an image of being carefree and a joker, but in truth, he was the most stable person in her life. If he hadn't been there when Ben was arrested, who knows where she'd be now. Hopefully not a cold-hearted bitch like her mother, but who knew? Maybe being lonely and scared was what led her mom to close herself off in the first place.

"Jeannie-girl, I worked too hard on these abs for you to zone out on me now."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

She blinked out of her revelry and her eyes widened. Al had already stripped down to his boxers. She raked her bottom lip with her teeth. Damn, the man had the body of a Greek god. She'd seen it a million times. Heck, she'd help create it. Googled the best exercises for each muscle group. Figured out the best diet to build and keep that picture-perfect body. But she'd never gotten to enjoy it. Never raked her nails down his back. Never licked his abs. And definitely never stroked his—

“Babe, I love a good eye-fucking as much as the next man but seeing as how we’re in a room with a bed and can do some actual fucking,” he said, interrupting her wayward thoughts. “What do you say we get this show on the road?”

Jeannie grinned as she shimmied out of her dress. “Who knew you were so logical?”

Al shrugged. “I’ve been hanging out with Hunter. All that brainy shit must have rubbed off.”

She bent over, pulling her slip down her legs, and whispered, “I can think of something I’d like to rub off.”

“I heard that.”

She pulled the pins from her hair, letting it fall slowly against her shoulders.

“What next?” she asked, her gaze focused on his crotch, tented under his boxer briefs.

“Get naked,” he demanded.

She smiled and licked her lips. “Your wish is my command.” She whipped off her bra and panties and tossed them across the room. “Your turn.”

Her eyes widened as he lowered his boxers, revealing a long, thick cock. Be still my clit.

“Let’s do this.”

Jeannie Knight was standing in front of him. Naked. He’d jacked off to this moment an embarrassing number of times, but not one of his fantasies lived up to reality. Her breasts were heavy and lush. More than a mouthful, though he’d happily die trying to fit those rosy peaks in his mouth.

That trim waist and full hips he’d admired so many times on the beach led straight to the most beautiful pussy he’d ever seen. And while it probably wasn’t politically correct to refer to himself a pussy expert ... he kinda was. And in his expert opinion, hers was the best, although he’d keep that compliment to himself.

Huh. He really was getting smarter.

He stroked himself as he stalked toward her. Her eyes followed him as he got closer, or at least, they followed his cock?

“You like what you see, Jeannie-girl?”

“Uh huh.” She nodded without lifting her eyes.

“Well, don’t be shy. Get on your knees and take a closer look.” His mouth moved up into a smirk as she did just that. Poor girl was dickmatized.

She wasted no time exploring his cock with her tongue. Her soft moans filled the room as she wrapped her lips around his tip and sucked.

“Fucking hell, Jeannie.” He ran his hand through her hair and pressed her against him.

She massaged his base and took him deeper like she was on a mission to suck the life right out of him. Who’s dickmatized now?

“Goddamn, you suck dick like a champ. I won’t last much longer. If you don’t want—”

“Mmm,” she mumbled, and rather than pull off, she dug in. Her head bobbed faster and harder. His balls tightened and his climax burst through, coating her throat with his release.

Stars dotted across his vision. He reached out a hand to prop himself against the wall. Before this moment, he thought he knew what a great orgasm was. He’d certainly had, and provided, more than his fair share over the years. But a blow job from his best friend had him coming harder than he had in his entire life.

“Gonna need a minute. Maybe two. And then it’s your turn.”

“Need some recovery time, old man?” Jeannie asked, smirking. “No problem.” She climbed onto the bed and propped herself against the headboard. With her legs spread wide, she lowered her hand to play with her clit. Her pussy was soaked, gleaming in the soft lamp light. “I’m sure I can find some way to pass the time while I wait.”

He watched as she rubbed her bud, slowly at first, with a hint of laughter in her eyes. But the amusement soon faded as she got into it. He stared, unable to move as he watched her pleasure herself. She was the perfect woman for him. Beautiful, inside

and out. Confident. Sensual. Sultry.

“Enough,” he barked as she tried to slip a finger into her folds. “That’s my job.” He crawled on the bed, burying his face between her thighs.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

She tasted like heaven. Sweet and salty, his favorite combination. He thrust his tongue inside her, relishing in the tightness. With one hand, he played with her clit and the other massaged her breast. He couldn't wait to explore every inch of this woman.

“Yes, Al. Just like that.”

Her thighs squeezed against his head, and her hand pushed his head from behind. He loved that she demanded what she wanted. Although, it was hard to imagine that Jeannie could do anything he didn't love.

Her moans grew louder. Hopefully, the room next door was empty. Otherwise, they were getting a hell of a concert. His dick was hard again, and he fought the urge to thrust into her. But he owed her this one first.

He moved up to her clit and sucked as if his life depended on it. It was only fair, now that she owned a piece of his soul, that he sucked a part of hers out as well. He inserted a finger, then two while he continued his assault on her clit until she erupted in waves of pleasure. He moved on top of her, propping himself up on his elbows.

“That was ...” She paused, lost for words.

“Yeah, baby. It was.”

“We should have done that sooner.”

Al laughed loudly. “Better late than never.”

“Amen to that.” She pushed him onto his back and raised up to straddle his waist.
“When’s the last you got tested?”

“Uh, after the incident.” Jeannie would know what he meant. Hard to forget that one.
“I was gloved up, but I still made them run every test in the book.”

“But not since then?” she asked, looking a little disappointed.

“Haven’t needed to.”

“Al, you saw the same videos in health class that I did. You always need to.”

“Unless you don’t.” He stared straight into her blue eyes, trying to make her understand.

“You mean, you haven’t ... not since ...”

“Nope. You were supposed to find me someone safe, remember? How’s that list coming?”

A flush filled her cheeks. “Ooh, right. The list. It was, uh, harder than you’d think.”

He chuckled and lifted up to kiss her on the lips. “I’m glad you blew it off. The perfect woman was right in front of me the whole time.”

“Oh, Al.” She sighed dreamily. “You can’t say that kind of shit.”

“Why not?”

“Because it makes me want to ride you into next week.”

“And that’s a problem because?”

She looked at him and grinned. “Good point. Not a problem anymore. I’m clean and I’ve got the birth control implant, so ...” She reached for his dick and lined it up. “You good with fucking raw?”

This woman. He took a deep breath to steady his voice so he wouldn’t sound like a pubescent teen. “Yeah, I’m good.”

She slid down him, taking his full length nice and slow. She bottomed out with a loud groan, which he was sure sounded very similar to the angel’s chorus.

Best. Pussy. Ever. Seriously. Pussy this good deserved an award. A gold medal. But is that something she would appreciate? Maybe he’d ask the guys next week.

She planted her hands on his chest and she rode him into oblivion like a damn rodeo queen. He rubbed her nipples as she worked him, taking what she needed. And he loved every second. Her pace quickened, and he thrust upward, the two of them matching each other, stroke for stroke until she screamed her release, shaking as the orgasm took her over.

He quickly flipped her on her back and pounded into her.

“You’re mine, Jeannie. You hear me? All mine.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Yes, Al. Only yours. Forever.”

With one final thrust he exploded into her, filling her up with his cum. Maybe one day he'd put a baby in there. But babies needed a lot of attention. They cried a lot. So he'd do that later, after they'd had a few years of interruption-free fucking.

Chapter 7

Jeannie awoke to the loud hum of an air conditioning unit and a hot body curled up behind her. Her body tensed as she recalled the night before. Marina and Christian finally tied the knot. Rose went into labor.

Crap! Rose! She reached for her phone and the arm around her chest pulled her back down.

“Not yet, Jeannie-girl,” Al's voice rasped behind her, pressing his morning wood into her ass.

Al. Right, she'd also fucked her best friend. Totally crossed the line they'd been dancing around. And she enjoyed every single second.

“Hold on. I want to see if there's an update.” She grabbed her phone and swiped through the notifications. “Al, look! Baby Isabella was born at 2:43 am and weighed—holy shit—nine pounds, eight ounces. She's such a cutie! Look at those cheeks! I can't wait to squeeze them.”

“Oh yeah? I can think of something I'd like to squeeze.” He grabbed the phone from

her hand and tossed it onto the bedside table.

She sighed as his hand reached between her thighs and her body instantly responded. She opened her legs to give him easier access. He rubbed her clit, dipping a finger between her folds.

“Wet for me already? I should have been waking up to this years ago, but I’ll make up for it now.”

She whimpered when he removed his finger, but he chuckled.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got something better.” He pushed into her from behind. His strokes were slow and gentle, as if he were savoring the moment. He continued to stroke her clit in lazy circles, driving her wild with desire.

His lips brushed against her neck, peppering her in soft kisses. “You going to come for me, baby?”

“Mmm hmm.”

His pace quickened as they chased their climax together. His cock was thick and long. She was far from a blushing virgin, but he was hitting spots that no man had reached before. Her thighs quaked as her orgasm hit, and he followed soon after.

“Damn, girl. I love you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know. Love you, too.” They’d told each other that a hundred times. Back when Ben was the glue that held their friendship together, they’d said it. Three kids so starved for love, the only place they could find it was with each other. They’d said it to reassure each other when Ben went to prison and his loss left craters in their souls. But saying it now after a night of making—

“I’m going to run downstairs and grab some breakfast.” Al kissed her lightly on the lips before hopping out of bed. He dug around his bag for clothes, then slipped on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

A lump formed in her throat as she watched him dress. She swallowed hard, trying to squash the feeling. Watching a man get dressed and walk out the door was nothing to get sad about. Did she think they were going to lie around naked in bed all day? Of course not. He paused as he reached for the door handle and turned around.

“My keys are on the dresser.” He nodded to the area next to the television where his keys were laid, along with his wallet and phone. “I’m coming back.”

“I knew that.” She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to hide her relief with fake annoyance. Maybe it was time to try therapy. Clearly, her dad going to prison and her mom walking out had left her with some abandonment issues. Which was probably why she usually broke things off first. Jeannie blinked at the realization, shocked that she’d never put the two together before.

“Whatever you say, Jeannie-girl. Just make sure you don’t sneak off before I get back.”

He knew her so well. “I’m just going to take a shower. Now hurry, before the early birds take all the good stuff and we get stuck with bran muffins.”

“Oh no, the horrors!” Al’s laughter followed him as he left the room.

Jeannie climbed out of the bed, planning to go straight for the shower when her phone rang, vibrating loudly on the small table. Looking at the caller ID, she had a sinking feeling her morning was about to take a turn for the worse.

Chapter 8

Al balanced two coffee cups and a plate of breakfast pastries as he returned to the room he shared with Jeannie. The bedroom.

Growing up as they had, relationships were precious. Losing Ben had gutted them both, and the idea of anything happening to his relationship with Jeannie was terrifying. But now that they had finally taken that step, he wasn't afraid anymore. Their foundation was solid. They already spent ninety percent of their time together. They knew the best and worst about each other. The only real difference was that now they got to have sex.

Fucking finally. Or was it finally fucking?He snorted a laugh and set the food on the counter.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Jeannie stepped out of the bathroom, her body dripping wet and the small towel doing little to hide her delicious curves. Checking his watch, he saw that they still had a little time before they needed to leave. Not enough time to do everything he wanted, but he could make it work.

“I brought the best the continental breakfast had to offer. I think I deserve a reward for my high-quality foraging.” He moved closer and noticed her eyes were red and puffy. “Woah, what the hell happened?”

“They canceled our visit.” She walked to her bag and took out the sweats he’d packed for her. Not her typical outfit, but he’d wanted to keep it modest for a prison visit. “I just want to go home.”

“Canceled?” Al sat on the bed and tried to focus on her words and not the view of her naked body sliding into her bra and panties. “Why would they do that?” This couldn’t be good. The visit had been scheduled online, just like they’d done every month for the last ten years. The only time they’d had a visit canceled in the past was during a hurricane.

Tears fell down her face. “He’s been hurt.”

“Hurt?” Al sat up straight. Accidents didn’t happen in prison. If Ben was injured, it was because someone hurt him.

“There was a fight. He’ll be in the infirmary for a few days, and then he’s being moved to solitary. They said it’s for his safety, but he’s not allowed to have visitors for ninety days.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know. Ben gets beat up, and they punish him for it?”

“I went through training with a guy that works as a guard at Central Prison. Let me see what I can find out.” Al grabbed his phone and scrolled through his contacts until he found the one he was looking for. After sending a text, he sat next to Jeannie and put his arm around her.

“Daniel will tell us exactly what happened. Until then, try not to worry.”

“Easier said than done.” She crossed her arms over her chest. The water dripped from her hair, forming a wet patch on the bed. He grabbed another towel from the bathroom and stood behind her. He placed the towel against her head and squeezed the water out.

Her body remained frozen while he added the leave-in conditioner and combed it through her hair. When they were in elementary school, he and Ben had taken turns dealing with Jeannie’s unruly hair. Her knots were legendary, which is why they took turns. But the job that had once been a chore was now a privilege.

The phone rang as he was wiping his hands on the towel.

“Daniel?” He flipped the phone to speaker.

“Yeah, hey, Al. Sorry to call, but this isn’t the kind of news you want to text.”

Al’s eyes met Jeannie’s and she reached for his hand.

“I’m with Ben’s sister. Just tell us what happened.”

“It’s not good. I’m not sure if you are aware, but Ben has affiliated himself with the Exiled Reapers MC.”

“With who?” Jeannie asked.

Al turned to her. “They’re a motorcycle club in the next county over. They splintered off from the Grimm’s Reapers MC that we have here in town ages ago. Apparently, when Christian’s dad was first elected sheriff, he told the original crew to either get straight or get gone. Some stayed and got straight, and others left and formed a new club.” Al shook his head.

“Anyway, when did he do that? I had no idea.”

“That’s not something our inmates tend to share with family during visiting hours. His former cellmate was Sinner Malone, the club’s ex-president, so it made sense for Ben to join.”

Jeannie let out a loud sob. Al wrapped an arm around her.

“How bad was he hurt?”

“Shanked in the side, but luckily, the guards found him quickly. He needed thirty stitches, but he’ll survive. The real problem is he lost his protection when Sinner got early parole. Solitary will keep him safe for now, but isolation has its own challenges.”

Jeannie wiped the tears from her face. “What about when he gets out of solitary?”

“Honestly? They’ll keep coming for him until he dies or joins a new crew.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Al asked.

Daniel snorted. “Other than work a miracle and get him transferred outta this place?
No.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Jeannie pressed her face into Al's chest and began crying in earnest.

"Thanks, Daniel. Let me know if anything changes, yeah?"

"You got it, brother. Wish I had better news."

Jeannie cried for several more minutes before finally coming up for air.

Al passed her a few tissues from the bedside table. She blew her nose and wiped her face, taking several deep breaths.

"Right, well, I guess it's a good thing you have that show lined up. Ben needs out of that place ASAP. A lawyer could probably ask for a transfer. The sign-on bonus will be enough for that attorney's retainer."

"The show?" Al stared at her blankly.

"Okay, I know you can be a little spacey at times, but don't tell me you forgot about Law of Attraction already?"

"Jeannie, I can't do that show. Not after ..." He looked back at the rumpled bed.

"We'll find another one." Surely, she didn't think he had any desire to date someone else now that they'd finally gotten together.

"And how long will that take? Ben needs to get out of there yesterday," she huffed as she pulled on her socks and shoes.

“We’ll try harder. There’s got to be something. How about one of those shows where I have to eat bugs or eyeballs?” Before this moment, Al had thought he’d do anything to help Ben. Hell, that’s how he’d ended up as a spokesperson for Divine Hemorrhoid Cream. But give up a chance with Jeannie? No way.

“Al.” Jeannie sighed and patted his arm. “You’re such a sweetheart. That’s why America loves you. Rock hard abs and a heart of gold. And they are going to be so excited to watch you fall in love.”

“But I, I mean, we ...” He stumbled to find the words. Was she seriously friend-zoning him right now? How had he gotten this so wrong?

“We got carried away. These things happen at weddings with all the romance and alcohol. It’s fine. We’re fine. We can just act like it didn’t happen.”

“Act like it didn’t happen?” he repeated. Act like the best night of his life didn’t happen?

“Yes, we had a one-night stand. Not a first for either of us, and probably not our last. Now you’re going to sign that contract and go date your ass off. It’s probably a good thing we did this since you’ve been out of practice for a while. It’s like I primed the pump, and now you’re ready.” She turned and started to gather her belongings from the room.

“Primed the pump?” His heart sank, and he clenched his fists while he counted to three, fighting the urge to punch his reflection in the mirror. What a fucking idiot. While he had always been popular with women, he was the guy they wanted to fuck, not date. The guy they called for a good time, but not for a long time. Hell, his own mother couldn’t be bothered to care for him. And he thought Jeannie would want him like that? Jeannie, the most amazing, wonderful, beautiful, loving woman? She knew him better than any other person on the planet. Which meant she knew he

wasn't worthy of her heart. He looked up as she opened the door.

"Sign the contract. They've offered to let me help with casting. I'll be gone for a few weeks, but I think that's for the best. To help with the casting, I mean. I can make sure they pick ladies you'll be compatible with."

"Yeah, well, you know what I like." He folded his arms over his chest and nodded toward the bed. It was a low blow, but he hated how easy it was for her to dismiss him.

"Right! Glad this didn't have to be awkward. See you later." She walked out of the room, pulling the door behind her.

Al fell onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Her vanilla and citrus scent clung to the sheets, taunting him with memories of last night.

"Fuck this." He sat up. So what if love wasn't for him? He'd gone this long without it and turned out just fine. Plenty of people found happiness in money and fame, and this show could bring him both. He'd go on that show and date those women. He'd get the money for Ben, and in the process, make sure his show was the best damn reality dating show the world had ever seen. Offers would fly in, and he would forget all about the time he'd stupidly given his heart away. But first, he needed to send a text message.

"Marina, I know you're busy banging your new husband but call me as soon as you get this message. I need you to tell me everything you know about reality dating shows."

Chapter 9

Jeannie repeatedly tapped the down button, urging the elevator to come faster. Tears

blurred her vision, and she feared she couldn't hold them back much longer.

As much as she'd try to ignore it, her love for Al had morphed from a sweet "I'm glad to have you in my life" love to a desperate "I can't live my life without you" love. Al was her first thought when she woke up and her last thought before she went to sleep.

Last night was a dream come true. Or a late-night fantasy. But that fantasy came at a cost, and Al was already eaten up with guilt over Ben's arrest. If they gave up the show to have a relationship, they'd delay any chance Ben had to get out. And God forbid he was in another fight and the worst happened. They would never forgive themselves. Their relationship would be forever tainted. They would hate themselves and worse, each other. But that would assume Al had been interested in more than one night. He didn't seem that upset when she suggested it was just a one-night stand.

The elevator doors opened, and Jeannie stepped inside, grateful for the loud family arguing over their plans that could distract her. She'd never cried over a guy before, and she didn't need to start today.

She grabbed her phone and fired off a quick email to the production company, accepting their job offer. The thought of casting Al's harem might make her skin crawl, but it would be worth it to leave town for a while. With a little time apart, maybe things could go back to the way they were before. Before she knew what it was like to join her soul with another, and before she had let it go.

Chapter 10

A few weeks later

Al squirmed in his seat, unable to get comfortable in the hard plastic chair. The cinderblock walls of the visiting room were painted white, decorated with a few posters reminding inmates to keep their voices down and that education was key.

He'd chosen a seat at the end, next to the wall. Despite the thin partitions between booths that were meant to offer privacy, he could always hear what the visitor next to him was saying. After a few minutes, the door on the other side of the thick window opened and several inmates entered. Ben sat in front of him. His face was haggard, and despite his beard, Al could see his cheeks were gaunt. Ben picked up the phone.

"Al, what are you doing here? And in uniform?"

"Checking up on you, obviously. I couldn't come as your friend because of solitary, but as official business ..." Al shrugged. When he had told Christian about the situation, the sheriff was more than willing to sign off on the paperwork.

Ben studied Al's uniform. "I know you told me you were a deputy, but until now, I honestly couldn't see it. It looks good on you."

"Ben." Al smirked. "Everything looks good on me."

Ben groaned, but Al was relieved to see some of the dullness fade out of his friend's eyes.

"I appreciate the reprieve from the hole, however you managed it."

“Yeah, about that. Jeannie’s been worried sick. What the hell happened? And how do you join a motorcycle club without a motorcycle?”

“They waive that requirement when you’re locked up.” Ben shrugged. “And in here, you have to be part of something. The lone ranger thing does not work out well. I learned that early on. My last cellmate was the president, or former president, so it made sense.”

“Yeah, but what about now?”

“I still have some protection.” Ben looked around and lowered his voice as he continued. “That’s how I landed in solitary. It’s not ideal, but it keeps the other guys off my back for now.”

“And later? You can’t stay in the hole for ten more years.”

Ben scoffed. “Of course not. The Reapers have alliances with other clubs. By the time I’m back in general pop, they’ll have worked something out for me.

“And if not?”

“Then I’ll do what I have to.” Ben’s eyes narrowed, showing a hard edge that Al had not seen before.

“And what the hell does that mean?”

“Can’t tell you that.”

“Come on, Ben. Talk to me. I’m your best friend.”

“Take a look in the mirror. We’ll always be friends, and I’ll always appreciate how

you've taken care of my sister, but we're on different paths now. I'm happy for you, I truly am. But things will never be the same as they were."

"So you mean you're going to," Al flailed his hands around, making a variety of motions that ended with him closing his eyes and tilting his head to the side with his tongue sticking out.

Ben shook his head. "No idea what the hell that was supposed to be, but yeah, probably."

Fuck. Al rubbed his hand over his face. His friend was not a killer. He'd gotten into a few fights growing up. That was inevitable where they lived, but everyone had always walked away. Prison had changed Ben, made him harder. Al didn't blame him for needing to protect himself, but he hated that it was necessary. Hated that he'd been wrongly convicted and was now forced to do terrible things just to survive. Now, more than ever, he knew Jeannie was right. Not about them just being a one-night stand, but about needing to put Ben first.

"We've hired a new attorney. She's one of the best in the state. She should be in touch this week. That's why I wanted to meet with you first, so you'd know to expect her."

Ben rolled his eyes, and Al fought back a smile. Brother and sister were so much alike. "I told y'all to stop with that. I've missed so much already that it doesn't matter anymore."

Al's heart broke. "And we told you, we'll never stop until you're out of here. I took a new gig, and the sign-on bonus was enough for the attorney to get started. She's requesting a transfer. Then when I get my full payment for the gig, she'll work on reviewing the evidence and all that crap."

Ben raised an eyebrow. “What kind of gig pays that much? You’ve got a good life now, you and Jeannie. I don’t want you doing anything to jeopardize that.”

Al snorted. “Thanks, dad. But it’s strictly on the up and up. Jeannie and sheriff approved, as a matter of fact.” And now it was Al’s turn to roll his eyes.

“Keep talking,” Ben said, the hint of a smile reaching his lips. “Now I know it has to be something good.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Al sighed and stared at the ceiling as he spoke. "I'm going to be the bachelor on dating show called Law of Attraction."

Ben's laughter was so loud, Al had to pull the phone away from his ear.

"Sorry, man, but I needed that." Ben wiped the tears from his eyes. "We've watched some of that shit in here. Those women can get wild. You sure you're up for that?"

"I'll do what I have to." Al shrugged, repeating Ben's words back to him.

"And you said Jeannie was okay with this?" Ben rubbed his free hand over his beard.

"More than okay. She's in New York right now with the production crew, helping to select the contestants." He hoped he kept the bitterness out of his tone.

"I see." Ben drummed his fingers on the table. "Maybe the question I should be asking is, are you okay with this? The last few times you two came to visit, I thought I was picking up some vibes."

"Vibes?" Al's head jerked back. "Between me and Jeannie? Your sister?" He cleared his throat, noticing his voice had risen a few octaves. "No vibes there. Nope. None at all."

"Al, look at me. Look at where I'm at." Ben waved his arm around the white walls. "You want to do right by me, then don't take your relationship for granted. You don't think I've seen the change between the two of you this last year?"

Al's face heated.

"And honestly, I can't think of anyone better for my sister. Unless you're some coward pussy running away from her."

Al scoffed. "Let's just say it's not me running, but I'd rather not go into details."

Ben's lip curled and he shook his head. "Please don't."

"Long story short, she's not interested." Al rubbed his chest as the familiar ache returned.

Ben snorted. "Look, I know I've been stuck in here for a long time, but I still know my sister. I've seen how she looks at you. I've heard the difference in her tone over the phone when she talks about you. She's interested. Very fucking interested."

"Time's up!" a guard shouted from across the room.

Ben sighed, and the light was already dimming in his eyes. "It was good seeing you, Al. Appreciate the visit."

"We aren't giving up, Ben."

Ben hung up the phone and joined the line exiting the room. Al waited, not yet ready to leave. As Ben approached the door, the inmate in line behind him slammed into his back and pushed him to the ground.

"Hey!" Al shouted as he pounded on the plexiglass partition.

The line paused, and the other inmates moved back as one of the guards pulled Ben's attacker off him. Another guard reached for Ben and pulled him through the doorway.

“What’s going on?” Al shouted. “Tell me what’s happening!” The remaining inmates shuffled back into line as if nothing had happened. And maybe this was just another day in Central Prison. But one thing was for sure. Al was going to follow his contract to the letter and not step one toe out of line. He’d do whatever it took to help his friend, even if it meant sacrificing his own heart in the process. It’s not like Jeannie wanted it, anyway.

Chapter 11

A few more weeks later

Jeannie grabbed a champagne flute from the waiter and tried to remember to sip rather than chug. She’d just been informed that her work with the show wasn’t ending when she returned to Grimm.

They’d asked her to stay on as consultant, given her local knowledge and close relationship with the star. Which meant she had to be on set. Every day. Watching Al hook up with all those women. She could have said no, but the pay they offered was excellent, and she wanted to contribute some of her own cash to Ben’s defense fund. Even though she helped Al get all of his gigs, it wasn’t the same as putting her own money in the pot.

At least tonight would be her last night in New York City. Gah, she hated this place. It was cool for the first few days, but she missed her quiet street and her friends. The production company insisted she attend this last meet and greet before she left. She’d rather be in her sweats at the airport bar, but a girl had to do what a girl had to do. Plus she might meet a new client.

“You must be that small town publicist everyone’s talking about.” An older gentleman settled beside her and offered her another glass of champagne.

“Oh, I’m good, thanks,” she said, holding up her glass.

His eyes narrowed, but he quickly recovered and raised his whiskey tumbler to take a sip.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“And I don’t know, maybe? I am from a small town, and I do work as a publicist slash marketer.”

“Ahh, a Jill of all trades. Fascinating.”

“I guess. I’m Jeannie.” She reached out her hand, but instead of the handshake she expected, he placed a soft kiss on her knuckles.

Jeannie’s eyes widened. Not that she was opposed to dating an older man, but there were age gaps and then there were age gaps. This would be like the Grand Canyon of age gaps.

She tugged her hand from his grasp and checked her smart watch. Thirty minutes to go. Her eyes glanced around the room at the dozens of partygoers. There wasn’t anyone else on her list of people she needed to connect with, so maybe she could finish her time with flirty grandpa. “What brings you to the party tonight? Do you work on a television show?”

The man laughed. “No, darling. I work in music. You may have heard of my company? Vizier Records?”

Jeannie’s eyebrows raised as she straightened her posture. “Uh, yeah, I’ve heard of Vizier Records.” Who hadn’t? Several artists on the top 100 charts were with Vizier. Just goes to show, you can never let your guard down at these parties. Luckily, she hadn’t said anything embarrassing.

“Although some of my artists wish to crossover into television,” he continued, “so I

try to keep these relationships strong. Do you work with any musicians?" He leaned into her, and his gaze intense.

"Just one, Marina Morris."

"Hmm, I think I've heard of her. Didn't she have a couple of viral videos? Have you signed her to a label?"

"No, she's—"

"Well, that's great news for me. I'm always looking for the next social media sensation. People love that backstory. Why don't you come with me to my suite upstairs? You can pull up some of her videos and I can let you know what kind of support we can offer."

Jeannie's head jerked back. Was this guy for real? It almost seemed too good to be true. Not that it mattered. Marina was adamant that she didn't want to be part of a big label, or even a small label.

"My client isn't interested in making any changes at the moment. She's a newlywed, and she's trying to focus on that for now."

Victor's face hardened and turned a dark shade of red. "Marina is married?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Ahh. Well, that made more sense. He'd been playing dumb so he could lowball them. He knew exactly how talented Marina was and how popular she could be.

"She married the county sheriff a few months ago." Jeannie grinned as his eyes almost popped out of his head. "He's a great guy, but a little on the possessive side. I can't imagine he'd want her to come up here to record an album, let alone tour,

without him. Although it might be a cute angle to pursue. The pop star and her devoted law enforcement husband.”

The man slammed his whiskey on the table, sloshing the liquid onto his hand. “Damn it.”

Jeannie’s eyes widened. This guy really was interested in Marina. Even though the timing wasn’t great now, that didn’t mean that Marina wouldn’t be ready for something more later. Jeannie pulled out a card and handed it over. “Why don’t you check back in about six months, and I’ll let you know where her head is at.”

He took the card, his fingers lingering on hers longer than was necessary. “Well, since Marina is off the table, why don’t you tell me more about you? I’ve got an entire PR department, and we’re always looking for more talent.”

Jeannie sighed. She enjoyed working for herself, setting her own hours. She had no interest in going to work for some big company. But it never hurt to listen. To fill up the time, she talked about her work with Snow, Al, and the businesses in and around Grimm County.

“I’m impressed. You’ve been able to make all your clients’ wishes come true. If you can do all that in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere, imagine what you could do here.” He waved his hand toward the giant windows overlooking the city.

Jeannie smiled. “I used to think that’s what I wanted, but now, I’m not so sure. I enjoy working with Al. We’ve come up together, and now that he’s about to have his own show, well, I can’t leave him.”

“You can manage his career from here.”

Jeannie snorted. “You don’t know Al. He needs a lot of attention. Like, a lot of

attention. Although, I guess if this show works out, he'll have a fiancée for that."Fuck.She'd tried to avoid thinking about that part. The part where Al might propose to someone and then marry her.

The man nodded. "I'll keep in touch. If you find that your star client doesn't need you to hold his hand anymore, I'd love to have you on my team."

"Okay, well, thanks. I appreciate that." That might actually work. If the mere thought of Al being engaged was enough to give her hives, how was she going to share a duplex with the happy couple? "I'll keep you posted, Mr.—oh sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"It's Victor. Victor Crawford."

Chapter 12

Aloud banging startled Jeannie out of bed. The sun barely peeked through the curtains, letting her know it was too early to be awake. Her heart caught in her throat. There was only one person who would bother her at this hour.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“I know you’re in there! Now open this damn door or I’ll use my key.”

Al. Her sweet, wonderful, amazing friend. She’d hoped spending a month away from him might dampen some of her feelings, but she was just fooling herself. Absence made the heart grow fonder. And hornier.

Steeling herself, she grabbed her short kimono robe and wrapped it around her body like armor. She could do this. He hadn’t fought her when she called their night a one-night stand. And soon he’d be hooking up with a bunch of women.

“Al, good to see you,” she said as she opened the door, then immediately regretted getting out of bed.

He was shirtless and wearing those stupid baby running shorts, reminding her of all the things she didn’t want to be reminded of.

“Why didn’t you call me when you got back? I would have picked you up from the airport.” He crossed his arms and huffed out a pout. “I wanted to pick you up.”

“Oh, I just figured ...” She trailed off, losing her train of thought. It was hard to concentrate in front of all those muscles.

“Figured what, Jeannie? That I wouldn’t want to see my best friend after she left me alone for a month?”

She closed her eyes, not wanting him to see the pain that she felt. That was the longest they had been apart in years. The last time was when he’d left to host a potato

farming documentary in Idaho.

She'd made it through knowing he was doing it for them, to change their lives and help her brother. But this time, the separation was because she had to pick through hundreds of women to date the man she loved. It sucked. Like really fucking sucked.

"Well, I'm back now."

"And thank God for that. A few texts here and there were not enough for me. Now go change, we've got five miles today and Christian scheduled a staff meeting first thing so I can't be late."

They ran together most mornings when the weather was nice. They took turns making playlists so they could listen to the same music. They'd tried listening to books a few times, but after one little reverse harem mishap, Al put a stop to that. Apparently, running with a boner was not comfortable.

"You still want to do that?" she asked. She could barely look at him without falling apart, and he wanted to just pick up where they left off? Like they hadn't spent the most magical night together? Maybe her brother's situation was a blessing in disguise. Clearly, Al had no problem forgetting the intimacy they'd shared.

"Do I still want to go running with my neighbor? Yes. Why wouldn't I? It's boring by myself."

She shuddered. Neighbor. "I'm sorry, Al. I don't think I can do this. It's too weird." If weird meant heartbreaking and soul crushing.

She stepped backward and moved to close the door. Al's hand slapped against it, and he pushed his way inside.

“I’m sorry. You can’t do this? Can’t do what?” He stalked toward her, matching her step for step until she was backed up against the wall. He propped his hands just above her head, caging her in. Staring into her eyes, he asked again, “Can’t do what, Jeannie-girl?”

“This.” Her voice cracked as she waved her hand between them. “Friendly banter shit. Best friends taking on the world shit. It’s not the same anymore.”

“And why is that?” The smirk on his lips showed he knew exactly what she was talking about.

“You know why.”

“Because you’ve felt the power of Al Junior?” He stepped back and waved toward his crotch.

“It’s too awkward. Once you’ve exchanged, uh, fluids, things just aren’t the same anymore.”

He looked down at his phone and started scrolling while he spoke. “It would be awkward if one of us wanted more than one night. If one of us was pining for the other, desperate to turn our friendship into something more, while the other one was aloof and didn’t care. But that’s not us, is it?” he asked, setting the phone on the side table and walking into the kitchen.

“Definitely not our situation,” she whispered, heart in her throat.

Within seconds, he was back with a broom and “Sexy Back” by Justin Timberlake played from his phone.

“Al? Why are you playing a stripper song? And why are you—oh my God. Please

stop!”

Jeannie burst into laughter as Al began a ridiculous dance that involved grinding against the broom handle. Oh, how she'd missed this. Whenever she'd been stressed about her parents, her brother, money, or boys, Al was always there to make her laugh.

“Oh yeah. I know this body of mine is a huge distraction.” He bent over and began what was supposed to be twerking but was closer to a seizure. Jeannie laughed more, feeling the tension ease.

“But here's the thing.” He straightened and walked back over to where she stood against the wall. “You can't do this?” he asked, leaning down until their foreheads touched. “Well, too fucking bad, because I can't do life without you. We'll figure it out. We'll drink too much. Smoke some of Snow's weed. Whatever. We'll figure it out, whatever it takes. I can't lose you from my life. You're a part of my soul.” He placed a chaste kiss on her forehead and stepped back, as if that settled everything. “Now go change your fucking clothes and let's run.”

Chapter 13

Damn, that was harder than he thought it would be. The one month separation should have been the hard part. But no, seeing her again and not being able to take her to bed and tell her how much he loved and missed her—that was the hardest part.

But it was stupid to feel that way. What bothered her was the awkwardness of being friends after she'd spent a night wrapped around his dick. No heartbreak. No soul crushing sadness. Just a twinge of discomfort.

Maybe he'd held out a bit of hope that she had changed her mind. That she wanted more than one night with him. That their time meant more to her than a casual fuck fueled by alcohol and a wedding. But no. She was ready to shut the door on their relationship entirely. He wasn't surprised that he could be so easily cast aside, given his own mother had done the same.

Well, fuck that. He'd promised Ben that he would look after his sister, and she wasn't getting rid of him so easily. If he was being friend-zoned, so be it. He had ten women who wanted to date him so badly they were willing to do it en masse. Al snorted. As if he'd ever be okay with his girlfriend dating a bunch of other men at the same time.

He was going to get through the next six weeks of taping the world's stupidest show. He'd done his research. Well, he'd talked to Marina. The woman had watched every dating show ever made and knew what made the bachelors either loved or hated. And more importantly, what type of female contestants made the show worth watching and which ones were snooze worthy.

He would be a perfect gentleman. Treat the women with respect. Keep one mean girl to stir the pot, but pay a lot of attention to the sweet ones. Lots of kissing to keep the viewers guessing who he would choose in the end. Okay, maybe Marina didn't suggest that part. But he had to do something to get Jeannie off his mind, even though the thought of making out with someone else made his stomach turn.

But he'd also researched exposure therapy. Again, the term research might be a bit of a stretch, but he did read the first few lines that came up in Google, and it seemed that if he wanted to get over Jeannie, hooking up with a lot of other women was the way to do it.

And the show would become so popular that money would no longer be a problem for them. The new attorney would get Ben's conviction overturned and Al could leave town knowing he'd fulfilled his debt. And if he did that with a new fiancée by his side, even better. Surely, he wouldn't still be pining over someone else when he was engaged?

Chapter 14

"You'll have a series of group dates with one-on-ones mixed in. At the end of each date, Shane, our host, will pull you away to set up for the night's elimination. We're calling it the arraignment. Get it?" Lindsey snorted as she looked up from her laptop. She was the show's producer and apparently a genius at reality shows, having already won three Emmys.

"I guess," Al said, cocking his head to the side. "That's usually when a suspect pleads guilty or innocent. I'm not sure it totally fits for a contestant elimination."

Lindsey waved her hands in the air. "It's fine. The average viewer won't care. They just need to hear keywords they're familiar with from Law and Order or C.S.I. Also, we aren't using the term contestants. They are women of interest."

Jeannie's leg bounced under the table, drawing his attention. She was seated next to him in a tight-fitting blouse that matched her blue eyes and a pair of ripped jeans that showed glimpses of her gorgeous legs. Was she nervous? Although she had gone to New York to work on the show, there were probably a lot of new faces in the room. He slid his leg against hers, offering his silent support. Her breath hitched, and her body froze. He itched to do more, to reach under the table and stroke her thigh until she relaxed.

"For the ones you want to keep," Lindsey continued, oblivious to the scene playing out under the table, "you'll hand them an evidence card." Lindsey's eyes lit up and she lowered her voice, "'Will you accept this evidence of attraction?'" She snickered as she pushed her glasses up her nose. "I crack myself up with this stuff."

Al rubbed his hand across his forehead. "That doesn't make sense." His eyes darted to Jeannie, who was taking notes again, but without the bouncing leg.

"Oh really?" Lindsey asked. "Which part?"

"Women of interest? That's just, well, forget it. It's fine." He ran a hand through his hair. "But as a deputy, I wouldn't ask someone to accept evidence. That's for the district attorney. They present evidence to a judge or jury—not to a person of interest, and never at an arraignment."

Lindsey rolled her eyes. "And the T-Rex didn't live during the Jurassic period, but everyone overlooks that because Cretaceous Park doesn't have the same ring to it. 'Will you accept this evidence of attraction' will be the hot new catchphrase, just you wait and see."

Al took a deep breath and nodded. He'd always wanted his own catch phrase. "I guess that'll work. What do I tell the girl I'm sending home?"

Jeannie straightened in her chair but didn't move her leg from his. "This one's my favorite." With her hand over her heart and sad puppy dog eyes, she said, "I'm sorry, but there's no evidence of attraction. Your case has been dismissed."

Al laughed. "Okay, that is pretty good. I'll have to practice so I can say it with a straight face." A throat cleared at the end of the table, drawing their attention to the show's host.

"If I might offer a suggestion?" Shane smiled, showing off his vibrantly white teeth. "I practice all my lines in the shower. Well, when I'm alone, of course," he said, winking at Jeannie.

The fuck did he just say?

Jeannie's laugh interrupted his angry thoughts. "Then I guess you practice all the time."

"Feel free to come and check. It's a big shower. There's always room for one more."

Jeannie fanned herself and grinned. "Ahh, my teenage fantasy come to life. A hot shower scene with Shane Ashton."

"Trust me, baby, I only got better with age."

Al slammed his water bottle on the table, and everyone jumped. "Are we done here? I need to get back to work." He didn't. He'd taken a few days off to get the show started, but he was done. He felt a bump against his leg and looked over to see Jeannie tapping the word "Chill" on her notepad.

"Just a few more things," Lindsey continued. "Filming starts tomorrow. We'll bring the women to the beach house where they'll stay for the duration. Wear your tux.

You'll have a couple of hours to meet the ladies, and then you'll sit with Shane and talk about your feelings. The dates will start the following day. Any questions? Concerns?"

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Nope,” Al said, hoping his smile looked genuine.

“Great. We’ll see you all tomorrow. Oh and, Al, remember, as of this moment, you are a single man. If you are seen with anyone outside of the women of interest, you can guarantee someone will take a picture and post it online. That will tank the show’s credibility and put us dead in the water. Which is a huge problem. I’ve got a toddler at home that refuses to potty train. Do you know how expensive diapers are?”

“Uh, not really.”

“Well trust me, they are. So don’t fuck this up. Plus, production will hit you with a fine and you’ll lose that big payday.”

“Don’t worry, Lindsey,” Jeannie said, crossing her legs and removing herself from his touch. “I made sure to put all the side chicks on notice when we signed up.”

“The fuck are you talking about, Jeannie?” Seriously, what was she talking about? He didn’t have any side chicks. Unless she was talking about herself. But Jeannie was never a side chick. She could have been the chick, but she didn’t want to.

Jeannie gave him a pointed look. “Any woman you’ve been involved with recently knows what’s at stake, and knows that if she cares about you, she needs to stay away.”

“That’s perfect, Jeannie. So glad we have you on board.” Lindsey stood up and slid the laptop into her bag. “And don’t be so hard on her, Al. She’s only looking out for you. Besides, there are ten-ish women of interest headed your way. We don’t judge,

so feel free to use them to scratch any itches early and often. Honestly, it's better for us if you do. All that drama is great for ratings."

"Ten-ish?" What the fresh hell did that mean?

"Oh now, Al. We do have to leave a few surprises. It makes for better TV."

Al closed his eyes and drew in a deep sigh. "Whatever, but you'll have to find that drama somewhere else. I'm no prude, but I won't hurt my future fiancée by sleeping my way across the screen."

"Jesus, Al." Lindsey flopped back into her seat and pulled her laptop back out and began typing.

"That was perfect, exactly what America wants to hear from their favorite deputy. I'm making a note. We'll need you to repeat that in your interviews."

"They all talk a good game in the beginning," Shane began with a smirk. "But after a few days surrounded by beautiful women begging for your attention, you'll sing a different tune. They always do." He walked out of the room with a wave.

"Asshole," Al muttered, waiting as Jeannie gathered her belongings and stuffed them into a messenger bag.

"Maybe he's right. He's hosted a couple of these types of shows. And I helped pick the women. They are beautiful and already in love with you."

"That's because they haven't met me," he muttered.

"What did you say?" Jeannie asked.

“Nothing.” He glared at her, his frustration peaking. “You want me to kiss and fuck around, then I’ll kiss and fuck around.”

“I didn’t say that!” She held his angry gaze and he saw the same torment in her eyes that had been in his every day since the wedding. She sighed and looked down at her lap. “I think you should do whatever feels natural in the moment.”

“Is that so?” he asked, reaching over to brush a stray hair from her face. “In that case—”

A throat cleared from across the room and Jeannie jumped back, nearly tripping over her chair.

“Everything okay over there?” Lindsey asked, her eyes narrowing as she removed her glasses.

“Yes!” Jeannie practically shouted. “All good. Just giving Al a few tips on wooing the ladies.” Al’s chest tightened, hating how easily she dismissed their moment.

Lindsey nodded. “Just don’t practice too much. Remember, this is supposed to be unscripted TV.” She laughed as she walked out of the conference room, leaving them alone.

Jeannie looked at him, her eyes filled with sadness. “Al, I—”

He held up a hand. “It’s fine. Let’s just go home.”

Chapter 15

“You look amazing.” Jeannie said as she tightened the tie on the Tom Ford suit Al filled out to perfection. Although, the man could wear a garbage bag and still look

mouthwatering.

Just friends,she reminded herself.And he's dating ten women.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Thanks.” Al shook out his arms and blew out a deep breath. “Thanks for doing this with me. You seemed a little nervous yesterday. I know you don’t usually get this involved with my jobs, but I feel better knowing you’re close.”

She soaked in his words, trying not to read more into them. “My best friend, who also happens to be my biggest client, is about to film the first episode of his very own television show. Where else would I be?” Her hands brushed over his shoulders as she continued to fuss with his suit.

“You had me worried when you didn’t show up on time.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I had a flat and my spare was out of air.” Actually, her spare was missing completely, apparently stolen when someone knifed her tire. But she couldn’t tell Al, because then he’d go into deputy mode and now was not the time. Besides, it was probably some kids Al had stopped from shoplifting trying to get back at him but didn’t realize they’d gotten the wrong car.

“Oh, that stinks. You can catch a ride home with me tonight, and tomorrow I’ll help you get a new tire.” He sighed as he looked up at the trees overhead. “This doesn’t bother you at all?” he asked.

Jeannie’s heart tightened, and she allowed the pain to strengthen her resolve. Her heartbreak was nothing compared to what her brother had endured in prison and would continue to endure the longer he stayed there. “Of course not, why would it?” She took a step back and looked him up and down. Time to suck it up, buttercup. “You are about to meet ten hot, and possibly rabid women. If you don’t keep your focus, they’ll eat you alive. Trust me, I’ve seen their audition tapes.”

“That’s not really comforting.”

“Well how about this then? I spoke to the defense attorney today and she filed Ben’s transfer papers. We’re doing the right thing. You and I had a moment of weakness. But we’re back on the plan. And right now, that plan involves you getting busy with ten lucky ladies. We’ve had worse plans.”

Al laughed. “Well, you have a point there. The ad campaign for Grimm Manure Company being top of that list.”

Jeannie grinned. “Oh, come on, the smell went away after a week or so.” The smell actually went away after a day, but Jeannie secretly added several scoops to Al’s indoor plants, so he thought it was him.

“Okay, people!” Lindsey shouted as she clapped her hands. “The first patrol car is arriving. Al, I need you by the gazebo.”

Jeannie adjusted the pocket square in his jacket, unable to resist touching him one last time. She tapped his chest and stepped back toward the crew. “Good luck. Try not to be nervous. Or a dork. Or an asshole.”

Al chuckled as he walked toward the gazebo. “I know it’s been a while, but I think I remember how to pick up women.”

Jeannie tilted her head as she replayed his words. When was the last time he went out on a date? For years, he’d had a constant stream of women coming in and out of his side of the duplex. Jeannie had even helped him get rid of some of the clingers. But now that she thought about it, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen him with someone. He’d said he hadn’t had sex since the incident, but had he not even gone on a date? Maybe Christian was keeping him too busy at work. Whatever the reason, he was about to make up for lost time. The first patrol car had arrived.

Al stopped pacing and took a deep breath. He could do this. He would do this. He was still haunted by his visit with Ben. He hadn't told Jeannie, afraid he wouldn't be able to hide his concern over the realities of Ben's life in prison.

She was right. He needed to do whatever was necessary to give his best friend a chance to be free again. Ben had given up years of his life for Al. There was no way Al could leave him to rot to pursue a relationship with Jeannie. Especially when Jeannie didn't even want a relationship.

A car door slammed shut and a voluptuous Latina in a tight black dress sauntered toward him. Huh, maybe this wouldn't be such a chore after all.

"Hola, mi encanto. I'm Mercedes," she purred.

"I'm Al, it's great to meet you." He tried to focus on her words and not the ample curves of her body. Jeannie might have a chokehold on his heart, but his eyes were wily little fuckers. Especially when Mercedes' tits were bursting out of her dress like two cans of exploded biscuits.

"I brought you a gift from my hometown of San Antonio." Her slight accent added a sexy spin to her words.

"That was very thoughtful of—" Al's mouth dropped as Mercedes reached into her breasts and pulled out two mini-bottles of tequila.

With a wicked grin, she handed them over.

"Don't tell me you have lime and salt in there, too."

Mercedes laughed as she reached back into her breasts, coming out with a plastic baggie. “One thing you will learn about me is that I am always down to ... party.”

With her eyes not leaving his, she reached for his hand and licked the area just below his thumb. She held out her hand to his mouth and raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, uh, yeah okay.” Al tentatively stuck out his tongue and quickly swiped the same area. Hopefully her clown car titties also held hand sanitizer.

Mercedes poured salt from the baggie onto both of their hands, which stuck to the moistened areas. She swapped out one of the mini bottles for a lime and linked their arms together.

“Lick, chug, suck!”

Al snorted. One thing was for sure, filming wouldn’t be boring. He licked the salt from his hand, drank the entire mini bottle, then sucked on the lime.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

He shook his head. “Wow, that was strong. Thanks for the shot, Mercedes, and I look forward to getting to know you better.” He handed her the empty mini-bottle.

She placed both bottles into the baggie, then shoved them back into her breasts. He watched her hips sway as she walked toward the house. Before she opened the door, she paused and looked back at him.

“One more thing, gringo. That’s not the only place I can store a mini bottle.” Then she turned and entered the house.

Al blinked, stunned silent. Surely, she didn’t mean ... His eyes scanned the crew, seeking Jeannie for confirmation. He found her doubled over with laughter. As though she felt his stare, she looked up, wiping the tears from her eyes. He mouthed, “Did she mean?” while pointing to his groin. Jeannie nodded as she erupted back into laughter.

Al shook his head, trying to prevent the visual from forming. What had he gotten himself into?

Three more patrol cars passed and dropped off more women of interest. A librarian from Chicago, a chef from Atlanta, and a nurse from somewhere out west. Nebraska? Wyoming? One of those. Her name was Charlene, at least he remembered that. She seemed sweet and offered to patch up any girls that got injured in a cat fight. Which seemed unlikely, but then again, the way he was killing it in that suit might drive the ladies a little crazy.

The fifth patrol car pulled up, signaling the halfway mark. Thank God. Who knew

dating ten women would be so exhausting?

The door opened, and he did a double take when a set of incredibly hot identical twins stepped out. They wore sparkly green dresses, fitting tight and leaving nothing to the imagination.

“I’m Desiree,” the first twin announced.

“I’m Delilah.”

Al’s head swung between the two.

“We’re twins,” they said in unison.

“Same soul,” the one on the left, Desiree, said.

“Split into two bodies,” Delilah finished. If they didn’t move, he could tell them apart.

“We do everything together.” They were back to speaking in unison, which was getting creepy.

“Everything?” Al asked. “Like signing up for a reality dating show?”

“We work together,” Desiree said.

“Play together,” Delilah said.

Al’s stomach clenched. Don’t say it.

“Sleep together,” they finished.

The girls were stunning. Their jet-black hair fell just below their shoulders. They were tall with legs for days. If this had been two years ago, they could have ended the show right then.

“And by sleep together, you mean ...” Al raised an eyebrow.

“Fucking,” they said.

Al swiped his hand over his mouth. He looked over at Jeannie and saw her whispering into Shane’s ear. She was standing with her tits pressed into his shoulder as he sat in his stupid director’s chair. Fucker probably did that on purpose. A real gentleman would have stood up to talk to her. But maybe she didn’t care. Maybe she wanted to brush up against him. Al sighed and turned back to the clit clones. If Jeannie could move on, so could he.

“I can’t wait to find out more.”

Chapter 16

“We’re halfway through meeting the contestants, so we’ll take a quick break to reset the lights and shift angles. Stay close, and nobody better leave the set unless you don’t plan on coming back,” Lindsey called out.

Jeannie walked over to the gazebo with a bottle of water and a honeybun. She passed them to Al and sat next to him on the bench.

“Thought you might need to recharge.”

“You’re the best,” Al said, tearing into the honeybun.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“What did you think? You have six lovely prospects so far. Although I guess it’s actually five, with the twins sharing the same soul and all.”

Al shook his head as he washed down the honeybun with his water.

“Do you think if I marry two women, they’ll give me double the bonus?”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that,” Jeannie said, knocking him playfully with her shoulder. “Why not go for triple? I bet you could convince Mercedes to join in. She seems up for anything.”

“Oof.” Al grimaced at the thought. “I’d probably have to quit my job. I doubt I’d be able to patrol the streets of Grimm with my dick rubbed raw from all that pussy.”

Jeannie’s eyes narrowed as a stab of pain hit her heart, but she quickly shuttered her expression. He was only doing what she’d asked him to do. What she’d begged him to do. But still ...

“Shane’s pretty cool, don’t you think?” she asked, secretly enjoying the way Al tensed at Shane’s name.

“I guess, if you’re into washed up teen has-beens.”

Jeannie laughed. “Jesus, Al. Judgy much? He made bank when he was sixteen and doesn’t need to work as much anymore. I can’t say I would have done any different. I had such a crush on him back then. It’s crazy to actually meet him.”

“Speak of the devil,” Al mumbled as Shane approached.

“Lindsey is ready for us to begin. We’ll have a quick chat, then gear up for the next round of women.” He turned to Jeannie and winked. “Cupcake, would you mind keeping my seat warm for me?”

Jeannie giggled and felt her face flush. He was so handsome. Like Prince Charming with his prefect white teeth and slicked back hair.

Al made a noise that sounded like a growl. Probably a burp from inhaling that honeybun. He always ate too fast.

Jeannie waited in Shane’s director’s chair. It was as comfortable as it looked. As soon as he returned, she stood up and was shocked when he sat down and patted his lap.

“I’m good standing, thanks.” He’d been flirty the few times they’d met when she’d gone to New York. She’d ignored it, assuming that flirting was part of the job description for teen heartthrobs.

But this? Asking her to sit in his lap in front of the entire crew? Maybe he was interested in something more. But was she? Why wouldn’t she be? The man was hot. And rich. Like, really fucking hot and rich. And she would need something to distract her from the ten-ish cunts going after her man. Shit. Al was not her man. He was her friend. Her neighbor. She sighed and turned her thoughts back to the show.

Jasmine, or Jazz, stepped out of the sixth patrol car in a beautiful blue gown. She was one of Jeannie’s favorites and probably would be one of Al’s too. Jazz was from Virginia, so only one state away, and worked as an attorney. With Al being a deputy, they should have plenty to talk about. And not that any woman on the show was unattractive, but Jazz was particularly striking due to her mixed Middle Eastern heritage.

Jazz was followed by another of Jeannie's favorites, but for a different reason.

"I'm Lilith," the woman dressed in head to toe black droned. With black hair, nail polish, lipstick, and dark eyeliner, she definitely gave off witchy vibes. "I cast a spell so that I would conceive your child on the next full moon."

"Woah!" Al stepped back, holding his hands up. "I'm not really up for that."

Lilith shrugged. "A common problem. But don't worry, I have a potion you can take."

Jeannie snickered and Al glared in her direction. She knew Lilith would remind Al of Carina. But for the show to work, it needed to be entertaining. She'd helped the producers to cast a mixture of women. Some that would be contenders for Al's heart and some that would be fun to watch. Lilith was in the fun to watch category, although she probably wouldn't make it through the night. There was no way Al could relax knowing another witchy woman was in a ten-mile radius.

"Shh," Lindsey whispered as Jeannie continued to giggle.

"Sorry!"

Two more contestants came and went. Paige, the pro soccer player, and Katy, a corporate secretary. One more to go, and another one of Jeannie's top picks. Not that Jeannie liked this one, but she knew Al's type and this girl fit the brief.

"Why do you think your previous relationships haven't worked out?" the casting director asked the gorgeous woman with the flaming red hair.

"Because I didn't want them to," Iona answered with a shrug. "I wasn't interested in a long-term relationship before. I wanted to have fun. Live life. The usual. But now,

I'm done with all that and I'm ready to settle into something permanent."

Jeannie drew a star next to Iona's name. That was a perfect answer, one that she was almost certain Al could have given himself.

"And do you think Al is someone you could settle down with?"

"Absolutely. I mean, look at him. He's hot as hell."

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Jeannie chuckled. The girl wasn't wrong.

“And I like that he's a sheriff's deputy. A man in uniform is sexy, and it also shows he's got a good heart to put his life on the line for others.”

Jeannie added another star. It was important for Al to be with someone who understood his commitment to the job. It wasn't just about the reality show. It may have started that way, but he was a deputy first and foremost.

“And what do you think Al would like about you?”

“Well, I, too, am hot as hell, so we have that in common. We'd make beautifulbabies.”

Jeannie flipped her pencil around and moved her eraser to the star.

“But more importantly, I think he'd like my personality. I'm a fighter. I fight for what I want, just like he's been fighting for his success all these years.”

Jeannie paused. Al was definitely a fighter. He would like that about Iona.

The casting director laughed. “Oh really? So does that mean you will fight for your man?”

“Hell, yes. Al is going to be mine, and I'll fight any bitch that gets in my way.”

Jeannie grinned and circled Iona's name. Every reality show needed a villain, and

they'd found theirs. And make that a villain who could potentially win the whole thing? That was a guaranteed hit maker.

Chapter 17

"Al, you've got a big decision. There are eleven women of interest, but two of them will go home tonight." Shane turned from Al and stared into the camera with a smile.

"Technically ten, since two of the women share the same soul. I don't think they can be separated." Al took a swig from his beer. It had been a long night, but the end was in sight.

Shane chuckled, and Al swore his teeth sparkled. "Which of the ladies have caught your interest?"

"Well, Mercedes for sure. She has a great personality and is someone I'd like to hang out with, which is important. I want a wife who is also my best friend. I also liked Jazz. She and I have a lot in common, and she seems very down to Earth."

"That's great. Now which of the ladies are you less certain about?"

Al's face heated. He hated the thought of hurting anyone's feelings, but these were the rules of the game. And he hadn't spoken to any of them longer than twenty minutes, so they couldn't be that upset.

"Lilith might be a little intense for me, and," Al paused as he glanced at his cheat sheet, "I wasn't able to get a good read on Katy or Charlene." Honestly, he hadn't had time to get to know any of the women very well, but he had to say something.

"Well, Al, you've got a decision to make." Shane set a briefcase case on the coffee table and popped it open. "These are the evidence cards, one for each woman of

interest that you want to keep.”

Al picked one up. It reminded him of a credit card, but with the picture of a fingerprint on the front and a hole at the top.

“When you’re ready, we’ll meet you in the Holding Cell.”

Al stepped into the living room, which was now decked out in crime scene tape. There was no furniture, save for a long bench in the center of the room. Two camera operators waited in the back of the room with Lindsey and Jeannie.

Shane clapped his hands and stepped forward. “Ladies! It’s time to judge your worth.” The women moved to sit on the bench.

Al snorted and Shane shrugged. “We’re still working on that line. I can always dub it in post-production.”

Al moved to the front of the room and set the briefcase on a table. He opened it up and picked up the first evidence card.

“First, I want to thank you all for coming here. I enjoyed meeting each of you. I wish you the best in the future, but for two of you, it will be without me.”

“Mercedes,” he called, and she bounced off the bench to where he stood. He held out the evidence card. “Will you accept this evidence of attraction and continue on this journey with me?”

“Hell, yeah!” She grabbed the card and shoved it into her bra.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Shane cleared his throat and stepped in from the side. “Um, actually Mercedes, we’ve got a necklace for each of you, and you’re supposed to collect the cards on the chain.”

Mercedes flipped up her middle finger and slid the card on the necklace. Then shoved the card back in between her boobs.

Al grinned. She was a fun one. He passed out several more cards until he only had one card left and three ladies. Er, units. The twins, Lilith, and Katy.

“Please know, this is more about me than it is about you. Destiny and Delilah, will you accept this evidence of attraction?”

Al cringed as the twins squealed loud enough to shatter glass. They jumped forward and ripped the card from his hands. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Shane stepped forward and looked at the remaining two ladies.

“Lilith, Katy, I’m sorry to say, but there’s no evidence of attraction. Your case is dismissed.”

Katy burst into tears, sobbing as if she’d lost her favorite pet. Al took an awkward step back. He hated to make anyone cry, but he barely knew her. Lilith, on the other hand, took a different approach. She pointed straight at him and chanted in a language he couldn’t identify.

“Winners!” Lindsey shouted. “Follow me into the lounge for celebration drinks. Losers, head outside for your final interview.”

Katy let out another wail, and Lilith chanted louder.

Jazz stepped up to Al and linked her arm in his. “Nice work. Looks like you dodged a couple of bullets.”

Al chuckled. “Nice use of the theme.”

She shrugged. “I went to college a few times.”

“Well, I didn’t go at all, so you made up for the both of us.”

“It’s a perfect match! Now let’s go get that drink.”

“You’re not afraid of that?” He nodded towards Lilith who was still chanting despite being dragged from the room by one of the crew.

“I’m a lawyer. It wouldn’t be my first curse.”

Jazz wasn’t such a bad person. She was cute, smart, and had a sense of humor. He caught Jeannie’s eye as they walked to the next room. She gave them a thumbs up, and Al sighed. If this is what she really wanted, maybe he should give it a shot.

Chapter 18

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Reality TV himself, gracing us with his presence.” Christian gave a mock bow as Al entered the conference room.

He rolled his eyes and grabbed a bright green muffin from the center of the table.

“I’m back for a few days while they set up for the next phase.” Al sniffed the muffin but couldn’t detect anything too outlandish. Marina’s baking efforts were legendary,

and not in a good way. Christian claimed Marina insisted he share them with the guys, but Al suspected this was Christian's way of getting rid of them faster.

Hunter took a sip of his coffee, trying not to stare directly at Marina's muffins as though pretending they didn't exist would keep him from having to take one.

"Mint." Nick sat at the end of the table, wiping green crumbs from his beard. "Like toothpaste."

"Excellent!" Al took a large bite, agreeing with Nick's assessment. "I've always found arrests to go much smoother when my breath is minty fresh."

Christian knocked his hand on the table, signaling the start of the meeting. "We'll keep it short today. Axe won't be joining us. He had a rough night, so I sent him home."

Hunter looked up from fake studying his laptop. "Everything okay? I can take over some of his shifts if need be."

Christian raised an eyebrow. "Somebody worried about burning out his CSI protégé?"

Axe was the newest edition to the department and typically worked the overnight shift. Because of that, no one wanted to see Axe leave since that meant they'd be back on the night rotation. But Hunter would be especially disappointed if Axe left because Axe had been training as Hunter's back up with the crime scene investigations.

"Nothing to worry about, just a little extra excitement. But I'll pass along your offer. Although, we could use some help at the front desk since Hope isn't back yet. Any chance one of your other sisters is available to fill in?"

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Hope was Hunter's sister, and she'd been their first and only admin assistant. Everyone loved having her around because she did a lot of the paperwork that they hated. But she'd gotten tangled up in a case with a drug queen, and one of Marina's mafia cousins had her in a safe house. Al shook his head. Come to think of it, for a small town, they saw an awful lot of excitement.

Hunter cocked his head to the side. "Maybe Fawn? I'll ask and let you know. Diane just finished a certification at Grimm Tech and is going to work with Al on his new show."

"Really?" Al grinned. He'd love to have another friendly face on set.

"Yeah, she's going to be on the camera crew. Kind of random, but she's always enjoyed photography and thought it'd be fun to work on some of the crews that come around here."

Christian nodded. "Let me know, otherwise I'll call the temp agency. How are those cold cases coming?"

Al sat up straight, his coffee mug striking loudly on the table. "Old cases? You're looking into old cases? How old?"

Hunter snorted and shook his head. "Not old. Cold, with a c. I mean, they are old, but I guess what we should say is unsolved."

Al slumped back into his chair. "Right, sorry."

“Axe has been helping me sort through the files. For the first sweep, we’re checking for cases that have evidence we can test with newer technology. We came up with a pretty good strategy, though.” He went silent as he typed into his computer.

“Come on, don’t leave us hanging,” Christian said.

Hunter looked back up from his laptop and grinned. “Sorry, right. We’ve been cataloging the files as we sort by type of crime, year, and the deputy who worked the case. As you can imagine, there are some deputies over the years who have more cold cases than others.”

Christian nodded. His father had been sheriff for over twenty years before he died. “Dad certainly went through some highs and lows with staffing.”

“Exactly. Deputies with a large number of cold cases would indicate that maybe that deputy was in the wrong line of work. And usually your dad, or whoever was sheriff, caught on to that at some point and sent the deputy on their way. We’re reviewing those first, with the assumption that the deputy left a lot of clues uncovered and they may be easier to solve.”

Christian clapped his hands. “That’s brilliant. I knew you were the right man for the job.”

“There’s one name that keeps coming up though, Deputy Ingall. He seemed to have more unsolved cases than most.”

Al’s stomach lurched. Ingall. He knew that name all too well.

“Idiot,” Nick said.

Christian opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and nodded. “Yeah, he

wasn't the brightest."

Nick grunted. "Couldn't find his ass from a hole in the ground."

Christian bit back a smile and continued. "From what I remember, he didn't last more than a few years. Hunter, great work. Alright, moving on, we've got a writer's convention coming in three weeks that will bring more people to Main Street ..."

The rest of the meeting went by quickly, but Al found it hard to focus after Hunter's report. Ingall had been the one that arrested Ben. If he was such a shitty deputy, how had he found all that evidence that put Ben away? They'd always assumed the drugs that were found in the trailer and car had belonged to one of Jeannie's mom's many boyfriends. But what if something else was going on?

After the meeting, Al grabbed Hunter before he walked out.

"Hunter, I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor." Al dug his hands into his pants and took a deep breath.

"Of course. What's up?"

Al's eyes darted around the conference room. Christian had already left, and not that the sheriff would have a problem with the favor he was about to ask, but for now he'd just rather keep it between them. "About those cases. Based on what was said about Deputy Ingall, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind looking into one of the few cases that he did solve."

Hunter pulled his hair free of his elastic tie and shook it out. "Tell me what you're thinking, Al."

"I don't know what I'm thinking, but ..."

Hunter raised his hand. “Actually, it’s probably better if you don’t tell me. Then I won’t go in with any bias. Who was the suspect?”

“Benjamin Knight.”

Hunter sucked in a breath. “Jeannie’s brother, right? I was in college then, but I remember hearing about that from my sisters. It was a pretty big deal. Ingall was the lead on it?”

Al nodded.

“Damn. Well, they say even a broken clock is right twice a day.” Hunter shrugged but didn’t look convinced. “I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. And if you don’t mind, can we keep it just between us for now?”

Hunter smiled. “Of course, brother.”

“Rookie!” a voice bellowed from the main room.

“Beast!” Al shouted back. “You gotta stop calling me that. Axe is the rookie now.”

Nick shrugged, a small smile peeking through his thick beard. “Let’s ride.”

“Sure thing, big man.” They didn’t usually go on patrol together, but on slow days, they’d pair up for community policing. Usually, they found a game of pickup basketball to join, or if they were lucky, a block party. Christian was all for it as it helped improve the relationships they had with the residents.

As Al slipped into the patrol car next to Nick, he wished, not for the first time, that Nick had been the one to drive up on Ben that day. Maybe then their lives wouldn’t have gone to shit over laundry detergent.

“Tell the truth. Is Shane as handsome in person as he was on Vampire Hills High School?” Marina asked as she snuggled Baby Isabella in her arms.

“Definitely.” Jeannie grinned, reaching for another onesie to fold. “I’ve been around celebrities before, but it just hits different when it’s someone you were in love with as a teenager.”

“Hits different, you say?” Rose's eyes widened as she licked her lips. “Do tell how Shane Ashton ‘hits different.’”

“Down, girl.” Jeannie chuckled at the wild gleam in her friend’s eyes. “What’s the matter? That big beast of yours not enough anymore?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “No, my man is doing just fine, thank you. But I had a six-week hiatus, so I’m still a little starved.”

“Six weeks?” Jeannie looked at Rose. “Lord, I knew babies kept you busy, but I didn’t realize it was that bad.”

Rose shook her head. “Babies do wear you out, but the six-week rule is more of a medical issue.”

Jeannie’s face paled. “Medical issue? Oh my god, are you dying?”

Rose laughed. “No, I’m not dying. But pushing a ten-pound mini human out of your vagina causes a lot of wear and tear that needs time to heal.”

Jeannie’s mouth dropped. “Are you serious? I thought your vagina was supposed to like, compensate or something? What about all that dilating and centimeters?”

“Well, it does, but at the end of the day, it’s still a big object squeezing through a

small hole.”

Jeannie turned to Marina. “Did you know about this?”

“Well duh. Don’t you remember in—”

Jeannie held up a hand to cut her off. Marina spent most of her first twenty-three years learning about life through television and could relate almost anything to a movie.

“Babies have never been my goal, so I guess I never paid attention. Six weeks. Jesus. I cut my foot on a tin can in the backyard and it only took two weeks to heal.” Jeannie looked between her legs and shook her head. “Don’t worry, J-Low. I’ll keep you safe from giant babies.” “How did we get on this subject? Oh right, Shane. We have not hit it. I meant that flirting hits different when it’s with your celebrity crush. But we have a date planned, so yeah. Talk to me in another month.”

Rose cheered, causing Isabella to wail loudly.

“Come here, my sweet pea. I’m sorry, but Mommy will make it all better.” Rose picked up her daughter from Marina and began to breastfeed. “Such a good eater, aren’t you, baby Belle?”

Jeannie watched Rose’s face soften. Isabella would never question her mother’s love, that was for sure. With only a couple months of motherhood under her belt, Rose was already showing her daughter more love than Jeannie had ever received from her own. A pang of jealousy rose in Jeannie’s chest, but before she could investigate whether it was for mother or daughter, something else caught her eye.

“Rose, your shirt is wet. Did you spill your drink?” The side opposite the one where Rose held Isabella was completely drenched.

“Oh, that’s my milk.” Rose grabbed a burp cloth and stuck it under her shirt.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“But that’s not the side you’re feeding her on.”

“Nope,” Rose said, popping the p. “Another fun fact you can file away for later. Your boob will leak when you nurse on the opposite side. Or when it’s full. Or when you hear a baby cry on the television.”

“Damn,” Jeannie whispered. “That’s crazy.”

“Have you not been around pregnant women or babies?”

Jeannie shook her head. “The only kids I hung around were Al and Ben, and they were older. And never pregnant.” She snickered.

“Well check this out,” Rose said and pulled Isabella off her breast. As she did, her nipple shot milk out in multiple directions like the sprayer on a kitchen sink. Rose cackled and put the fussy baby back to nursing.

“What the fuck just happened?” Jeannie asked, looking at an equally shocked Marina.

“They don’t show that on TV,” Marina said, awe in her voice.

“Isn’t it cool? I’m nature’s fire hose! And, Jeannie, you can hang out with us anytime and ask anything. That way you can be more prepared when it’s your turn.”

Jeannie’s head jerked. “My turn? You better knock on wood. Motherhood is not something I am cut out for.”

“What do you mean?” Marina asked, picking up a stack of little bloomers to fold. “I’ve seen how you are with Al and the rest of the crew. You’re a natural caretaker. If you don’t want kids because you don’t want kids, I support you one hundred percent. But if you don’t want kids because you don’t think you’d be a great mom, well, I think you’re wrong.”

There was an awkward silence while Jeannie struggled to respond. Her mother was a neglectful piece of trash. While she couldn’t be any worse, she wasn’t sure she knew what better was.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. First, I’d need a man, and while things with Shane are looking promising, we aren’t anywhere near that stage.”

Rose and Marina shared a look.

“Uh, excuse me, what was that look for?” Jeannie dropped the little dress she was folding to shoot daggers at her friends.

Rose grinned. “What about Al?”

“Al?” Jeannie gulped. Be cool, be cool. “What about him?”

“Don’t play coy with us,” Marina chided. “I saw you two sneak off at the wedding.”

“We didn’t sneak off. Al rented a room so we wouldn’t have to drive home. We were being responsible.”

“Responsible.” Rose nodded as she moved Isabella to her other breast. “Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

Jeannie rolled her eyes. “The man is literally dating ten women right now. He’s in

manwhore heaven.”

“So, something did happen!” Marina jumped up, dumping the folded clothes on the floor.

“Nothing happened.” Jeannie shifted in her seat and studied the tiny shirt in front of her. “Oh hey, do either of you know an affordable electrician? I heard a loud noise the other day, and ever since, I’ve only been able to use half my outlets.”

As the girls prattled on about home repair, Jeannie breathed a sigh of relief. It’s not that she didn’t trust them or that what happened with Al had to be a secret. But if her brain acted like nothing happened, maybe soon her heart would believe it.

Chapter 20

“Listen up, crew. Our local expert has a fun date planned for us today.” Lindsey looked up briefly from her laptop as she addressed the crew. “Let’s review the schedule. The women should arrive any minute.”

Jeannie took a deep breath and stepped in front of the group. There were about twelve of them, a few on cameras, a few on mics, then a couple with Lindsey reviewing footage. Even more unnerving was the empty director’s chair next to Lindsey that had “Jeannie” written across the back.

She nibbled her bottom lip. Until now, she’d offered ideas and suggestions, but she never led anything. Impostor syndrome was in full effect. She scanned the crew, expecting to see annoyance, but everyone looked eager to get started. Al caught her eye and gave her a tiny thumbs up, then strode through the mass of people to stand next to her.

“Right, then,” Jeannie began, her confidence boosted by Al’s presence. “We’re

starting with a beach clean-up with Keep Grimm Gorgeous. Al is really big on giving back to the community, so this will give him a chance to see what the girls think about volunteering their time for others.”

“Good thinking, Jeannie-girl,” he said, causing her heart to flutter. He never used that nickname around others. “I want a woman who is generous with her time and not afraid to get a little dirty.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Lindsey's head bobbed up from her screen. "Diane!" she shouted.

"I got it, don't worry," a voice rang out in front of them.

Damn, where had she come from? Diane was in front of Al with her camera focused on his face. Jeannie had always enjoyed hanging out with Diane. She was a lot of fun, with her arms sleeved in tattoos and blue highlights streaking through her dark hair.

Jeannie shook off her surprise and continued. "Glad you approve, Al. The women's wardrobe trailer is in the parking lot over there." She pointed up to the other side of the dunes. "The ladies can use that to change between activities, or just hang out when they aren't filming. After the litter clean-up, the women break into two groups. The first group will play a game of beach volleyball with Al as the referee."

Al nodded. "I think I can handle that."

"The other group will have a sandcastle-building competition, also judged by Al. The evening will end with a barbecue, and the women from the winning teams will get a seat at Al's table. While they're having dinner, the prop crew will set up an arraignment scene on the north end of the beach. After dinner, Al and Shane will shoot a quick recap together, and then we'll move to the arraignment where Al sends two girls home. Any questions?"

No one had any, so the crew dispersed to set up. That went well. Maybe she did have a talent for this kind of thing.

"Nice job," Al said, reminding her he hadn't left yet.

“Thanks, but don’t you need to get some makeup or something?”

Al laughed. “Later. The volleyball game sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Mmph,” she mumbled, rolling her eyes. She knew he’d love that. What man wouldn’t?

He leaned in next to her ear. His breath tickled her neck when he whispered, “But I’d like it a lot better if you were the one in the skimpy outfit, and the ball you were chasing after was—”

“And the makeup lady is calling,” she said, laughing and pushing him toward the trailers.

He held his hands up, shrugging as he backed away. “I’m just saying.”

She walked over to her empty director’s chair next to Lindsey and took a deep breath. What was he just saying? And why was he just saying it now, of all times? She shook her head, trying to clear her mixed up thoughts. Today she had an amazing opportunity to help direct the episode, and nothing was going to get in the way of that.

“Let’s do this,” she said, grinning at Lindsey. But instead of the nice comfy seat she was expecting, her world flipped upside down with a loud crash.

“Damn,” Delilah’s face loomed over Jeannie from where she lay on the ground.

“That looks like it hurt,” Desiree said, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

“Where did you two come from?” Jeannie asked, slowly making her way off the ground.

Lindsey looked down her glasses at the pile of wood and canvas that used to be Jeannie's chair. "Huh." She wiggled in her chair, testing to see whether her chair would spontaneously fall apart too. But, of course, her chair worked fine. "Just bad luck, I guess. Check with the prop guys. They probably have another one in the trailer." She shrugged and turned back to her laptop.

"Back to work, people!"

Jeannie's face burned as she stood up and resolved not to sit again for the entire taping. Tomorrow, she'd call Madame Clarice and schedule an appointment. Sure, the woman pretended to be a fortune teller to scam tourists, but maybe she had a crystal or something Jeannie could use to get rid of the bad juju that seemed to be following her around.

"If I wanted to be knocked in the head by a big round ball, I'd jump up and down," Mercedes said, pointing to her breasts as she pulled Judy away from the sandcastle area and pushed her toward the makeshift volleyball court. Jeannie had wanted Mercedes in the volleyball game because she'd said in her interview that she hated sports. Not that she wanted to make Mercedes look bad in front of Al. It just made for good television.

"It's fine," Judy answered. "I've read all about volleyball." She turned to look at the camera. "You too can enjoy a great book about volleyball. Visit your local library and look under the number 796.325."

The litter clean-up had gone surprisingly well. Most of the women seemed to enjoy it, or if not enjoy, they didn't complain as much as Jeannie had hoped they would. Expected they would. Not hoped. What did she care? Beach habitat was the real winner here.

The volleyball game began with Judy and Paige, the soccer player from Florida, against the twins and Charlene. Surprisingly, the twins played very well, probably because of the whole mind meld thing they had going on. In the end, Judy's team won, but only because Paige was so competitive that she managed to win almost every serve.

Mercedes and Jazz won the sandcastle competition for their recreation of the Alamo. Jeannie pulled up a picture on her phone and it was surprisingly realistic. Apparently, Mercedes had worked there as a tour guide, so she really knew the place, and Al was a closet history nerd. Leann had tried to use her chef background to create a diner with Iona, but they never stood a chance.

Dinner was hectic. Al had time with the four winners, but of course the four-ish losers weren't too happy. Especially Iona, who eventually walked over and stole Al for a private one-on-one.

Judy pushed up her glasses. "There's a few books on etiquette I'd like to recommend to that one."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Oh shit!” Mercedes reared back, clapping Judy on the back. “Is that a librarian burn?”

“Well, clearly she needs some lessons.”

“Clearly,” Mercedes laughed, “but you strike me as more of a lover than a fighter, so take some of this.” She pulled a mini bottle of tequila from her breasts and dumped it into Judy’s orange juice.

Judy eyed the drink with suspicion. “I’ve never had a screwdriver before.”

“Then how do you know what it’s called?” Jazz asked. “And pour me some of that, too.” She held out her cup to Mercedes.

“How else? Mixology, 641.874.” Judy shrugged and gulped it down.

The women howled with laughter, and at this point, they all joined the winner’s table with Mercedes serving as bartender. She also had rum, vodka, and gin mini bottles so everyone was happy. They quizzed Judy on more topics, and she knew the Dewey decimal number for each one.

Al finally returned, looking very sheepish with tousled hair and lipstick all over his neck. Jeannie’s lip curled. Of course he’d made out with Iona. The woman was sex on a stick and exactly his type. She turned to Shane. “Time to move this along.”

“Are you sure? I overheard the twins saying they wanted to steal him for a little two-on-one action. Just one clip of that in our previews will guarantee top ratings for our

first episode.”

“There’s no time!” Jeannie snapped.

Shane put his hands up. “Sorry, sweetheart.”

Jeannie sighed. He was right. She should let that play out, but one make-out session was enough for the night. “We also don’t want Al looking like a manwhore. That might turn off some viewers. Besides, the sun is about to set, and Lindsey wants the lighting for the arraignment.”

One hundred percent not true, but Shane didn’t have to know that.

“Whatever you say. You’re in charge.” He winked and blew her a kiss as he strode into the scene to announce the end of dinner.

Huh. They’d been flirting for weeks. Maybe it was time to turn things up a notch. Al certainly was.

Chapter 21

Al waved goodbye to the crew and pressed the unlock button on his key fob. After sending home Judy (“I’m more of a movie kinda guy”) and Leann (“I’m just not feeling that spark”), all Al wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed.

Well, go home, take a long hot shower, and then crawl into bed. Iona had practically mauled him during their time alone. If the cameras hadn’t been there, he was sure she’d have tried to pull his dick out. She was hot, no doubt about it. But he wanted to know a person before getting down to business.

Jeannie stood at the back of the parking lot, next to trailers. “Need a ride?” he called

out.

“Why would you give her a ride?” Mercedes , causing Al to jump with her sudden appearance.

“Because she’s my neighbor and her car is busted?” Al said. He’d tried to patch her tire, but there was no patchinga razor blade puncture and neither of them had had time to get a new spare from the auto shop.

Mercedes put her hands on her hips. “I don’t think you should drive some randomputaaround.”

“Hey, now,” Al said, not wanting to get into an argument, but not willing to stand by while Jeannie was called names. “That’s my best friend, and you need to get moving before you miss your ride back to the hotel.”

Mercedes opened her mouth to say something else, but Jazz dragged her toward the bus, shouting words in Spanish along the way.

“Well, that was intense.” Jeannie twirled her ponytail with her finger. “But maybe it’s a good sign that she’s feeling so territorial?” She watched Mercedes and Jazz enter the van. “But I wonder if ...” She shook her head. “Anyway, thanks but no thanks. I’m going out for drinks with the crew. Shane will make sure I get home safe.” She turned and followed Shane to his car.

“Hey, Shane!” Al called out when they’d made it about halfway. “You got a second? I have a question about our next scene.”

Shane whispered something in Jeannie’s ear and raised his key fob to unlock the door of his ridiculous yellow Corvette. Leaving her to walk the rest of the way, he jogged over to Al.

“What’s up?”

“Just curious about your intentions with Jeannie.”

“My intentions? What are you, her father?”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Her neighbor.” Al crossed his arms over his chest. “And we share a very thin wall. So, I’ll ask again. What are your intentions?”

“To get a drink with a beautiful woman.” Shane’s eyes narrowed, and he lowered his voice. “You aren’t getting greedy, are you? Are your women of interest not interesting enough? Better not let Lindsey find out your eyes are wandering outside the show.”

Al’s lips tightened. Fuck, he was right. “Fine. But you hurt her, and you’ll be hosting with a black eye.”

Shane grinned. “How about this? I promise to only hurt her if she’s into it.” He snapped his brilliantly white chompers together in a mock bite, then walked off.

Al’s body vibrated with anger. He ached for his bed, but he supposed he could drop in at Susie’s Bar after his shower. But only because the crew was going and he was a team player. And then he could bring Jeannie home, since they would be headed in the same direction. He cracked his knuckles, feeling moderately better with his new plan.

Diane walked up to Al and rubbed his back. “What a day, huh?”

Al had forgotten Hunter’s family was so touchyfeely.

“I guess.”

“You working at the station tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I go in at seven.” He continued to stare as Shane drove off with his muffler rumbling loudly. Poser.

“Then you probably need to get some sleep. You know, I’m heading to the bar with the crew. And Hunter texted that Snow’s in town for the rest of the week. I’ll get her and Fawn to come out, too.” She tapped his back. “We’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Oh, I’m not, I mean, she’s an adult.” Al shrugged, stopping himself before he sounded like an even bigger idiot.

Diane laughed. “She is, but neither of y’all are known for making great decisions.” She waved her hand around at the production crew.

Al’s head reared back. “Hey, now.”

“You head home. Get some sleep so you can show up to work on time tomorrow and not piss off Christian.”

Al considered her offer. Pulling an all-nighter before a shift was a terrible idea. Not only because Diane was right and Christian would be pissed, but because the citizens depended on him to keep them safe. If he was tired, his reflexes would be off. He could make a mistake that could lead to someone getting hurt.

“Fine. Thanks, Diane.”

“No problem. We’ll make sure Jeannie doesn’t get into any trouble.” Diane laughed. “Unless she wants to get into trouble, if you catch my meaning.”

Al sighed. He caught her meaning, and that’s exactly what he was afraid of.

Chapter 22

“Well, lookee here, it’s the Bachelor Deputy. I sure hope you remember us when you start hosting shows on the Food Network.” An older lady with hair piled on top of her head in a bun sat behind the front desk.

“Impossible, Mrs. Williams. You know I’d never forget a beautiful woman,” Al teased. Apparently, Hunter’s sister Fawn had no interest in administrative work, but his mom was suffering from boredom with her empty nest.

She fanned her hand in front of her face. “Whew, with lines like that, I bet those ladies are tripping over themselves to get to you.”

Al winked. “You know I’m sworn to secrecy.”

She groaned, “Yeah, I know. Diane has been like a lockbox. Won’t tell me anything. I might bake some of Ray’s weed into a batch of brownies, then she’ll tell me everything.”

Al laughed and covered his ears. “Don’t say that here! You know Christian likes to play things close to the law.”

“Yeah, yeah. He’s got a prescription. Anyway, I’ve got scones in the breakroom if you want some. The ones with blueberries are mine.” She leaned forward and looked around the room, whispering, “The ones with ... well I’m not sure what they’re with, but the bright orange ones are Marina’s.”

“Oooh, those sound like her sweet potato and turmeric scones. Not her best, but better than the spinach and matcha. Since I hate having women fight over me,” he raked a hand through his hair, “I’ll have one of each.”

“Get out of here, you rascal,” she said, laughing as he walked away.

Al waved to Nick as he made his way to the breakroom. After spending too many days hungry, he never turned down food. Even Marina's.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

After grabbing the scones, he returned to his desk and was logging onto his computer when Christian walked in.

“Looks like it might be a slow day today. Only one call so far. Al, how about you take it?”

“No prob, Sheriff. What is it?”

“Possible solicitation over at the Weeping Willow Trailer Park.”

Al sighed, the lurch in his stomach making him glad he hadn’t tried Marina’s scone yet. “Did they say which number?”

“One-one-seven.”

Of course it is.

“Right, I’ll head out now.” He placed the scones in a baggie and stuck them in his desk.

Nick stood up, a knowing look in his eyes. “Not much happening. I’ll go, too.”

Al thought to shrug him off, tell him that was unnecessary, then thought better of it.

“Appreciate it, brother. With that place, I might need the Beast.”

“For you or for her?”

Good question.

The Weeping Willow Trailer Park hadn't changed much in the years since he'd last visited. Five rows of rusted-out trailers made up the park with a few empty slots waiting for the next family to park their home.

Pulling in front of one-one-seven, memories of his last visit filled his mind. He'd just been sworn into office and donned the uniform for the first time. He was eager to show his mother that he'd made something of himself. That he had a proper job with real benefits for once. He should have known that was a mistake.

She'd praised him for his latest con and asked him to steal some drugs from the evidence locker. When he explained it wasn't a con, and he wasn't stealing for her, she laughed at him and threw him out. He swore he'd never go back.

"Want me to take it?" Nick asked.

Nick had brought Al home a few times during his teenage years, so he was well aware of the type of woman Ginger was. It was one of the reasons he usually let Al and Ben off with a slap on the wrist and a bag of burgers.

"Nah, I got it."

Al knocked on the door. "Grimm County Sheriff's Office, open up!"

After several long moments, the door finally .

Ginger stood in a thin gauzy robe. She'd lost weight, close to fifty pounds if he had to guess. She grinned up at him, showing a few less teeth than the last time. Her hair

was still teased and platinum blonde. She raised a hand and set it on the rusty door frame.

“Grimm County’s finest gracing my humble abode. What’s going on? You selling popcorn or something?” she asked, her laughter quickly turning into a hacking cough.

Al sighed. The smell of mildew wafted onto the porch, causing him to take a step back. “Somebody called in a solicitation on you. Turning tricks again?”

“So what if I am? It’s a free country. It’s not like I have a son who takes care of me or anything.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure once your son realized you were the only person who had three light bills and two rent checks due every month, he decided to stop funding your drug habit.” The living room behind her had the same furniture he’d grown up with, only now he could see the metal springs pushing through the surface of the cushions.

“You always were a little shit. My mom told me to abort you, but I refused. She was short sighted. I knew the girls with kids got way more government money than the girls without. Too bad you wrecked my womb so I couldn’t keep going. The way I see it, it’s your fault I had to turn to this life. I could have been a teacher.”

He’d heard this before, but it still stung. “Who’s my dad, Ma?”

“Fuck you.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Exactly. You were turning tricks long before I came out. You got anyone in here?”

“No.”

“Nick, you see anything in your sweep around the park?”

“Few needles, nothing else.”

Al sighed, placing his hands on his tactical belt. “I don’t have anything to bring you in on, so for now I’m going to let you off with a warning. Keep your dealings inside your trailer, and you should be okay.”

“I’ve been real hungry lately. Maybe you can give me some money before you leave.”

“Sorry. I’m all out.”

“That’s not what I heard. I heard you’re on all kinds of TV shows now.”

“I’m not funding your habit. Call me if you ever go to rehab.”

“Oh, you think you’re so much better than me? Why the hell do you think you’re on those TV shows? It’s not your brains, that’s for sure. It’s your body. That’s all anybody will ever want you for.”

“Let’s go.” Nick grabbed his arm and pulled him down the steps.

“Not so much different from dear old mom, are ya, son?” she shouted as he got back into the patrol car.

Fuck.Maybe she was right.

Chapter 23

“Now, that’s gonna leave a scar,” Shane spoke into Diane’s camera as they stood next to the racetrack at Johnny’s Fun Park.

Al winced along with the rest of the crew as Desiree’s go-kart tumbled into the hay bales on turn three. Today’s group date began with a high-speed chase. A drone flew around the track, dangling a giant picture of Al’s face. The first woman to make twenty laps would win a one-on-one snack break.

Delilah’s nails dug into Al’s arm as they walked to the first aid tent. Since only one person could fit into the go-kart, she’d been sidelined for the challenge.

“Oh my god, are you bleeding? Where’s your cut?” Delilah shrieked as the medic wiped a red substance from her sister’s forehead. “Don’t worry, no matter how bad it is, I’ll make a matching one.”

The medic’s eyes widened as he looked between the two twins. “Actually, it’s just some paint from the steering wheel.”

Al peeled Delila’s hand from his arm and squatted next to Desiree. “Are you going to be okay?” He might not want to marry the woman, er, women, but he didn’t want anyone getting hurt because of him.

Desiree nodded. “Yeah, maybe a small bruise, but that’s all. And depending on how it looks, we’ve got enough makeup to either cover it up or put a matching one on

Delilah.”

Al chuckled and stood up. “I’m glad to hear it. You ladies sit tight and I’ll have them send over a couple of snow cones.”

After coordinating their snacks, he walked back to Shane and Diane. “Good news. It was touch and go for a few seconds, but you can all relax. The twins are still identical.” He looked over the lens to wink at Diane, who was struggling to control her laughter.

“Paige’s competitive nature has put her at an advantage in this challenge. She’s already lapped most of the girls, and the only one even close to catching up is Iona.” Shane continued to narrate the race for the camera while Al slipped away to find Jeannie.

He found her lounging on top of a picnic table underneath the giant shade canopy. The temperature was in the high seventies today, and she’d embraced the warmer weather with a pair of cutoff shorts with a long-sleeved baseball tee. The simple outfit shouldn’t have been so sexy, but who was he kidding? This was Jeannie. Everything she wore was sexy.

He cleared his throat, hoping she wouldn’t notice the bulge in his pants as he sat next to her.

“What happened to Mercedes? I thought she was about even with Paige before Desiree crashed.”

“Disqualified for cheating.” Jeannie pushed her sunglasses into her hair and her eyes twinkled as she continued. “She had a bottle of Silly String and shot it at Paige. It’s against the rules to distract the other drivers.”

“Silly String?”

“Yup. Pulled it right out of her titties.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Al chuckled. “Damn.” This was getting intense. First Desiree was injured, and then Mercedes was caught cheating. Were the women that eager for a date with him? By now, he’d had several conversations with each of the women, but he didn’t feel like any of them really knew who he was. His mom’s words rang in his ears. Maybe they didn’t care to know him.

“Imagine if we knew her back when you and Ben needed to hide those bottles of Tide.”

“Yeah, imagine,” Al whispered.

“Hey, are you okay?” Jeannie asked. She placed a hand on his cheek and forced him to look at her. “That was funny. Why didn’t you laugh?”

“It’s nothing, I’m just tired from working at the station and then working here.”

“Are you sure that’s it?” Her eyes searched his, seeing more than he wanted her to.

“I’m sure.” He eased off the table, unable to handle her touch without craving more.

“Well, tonight is karaoke night, so maybe that will cheer you up. Don’t forget, they booked Marina for the local talent since her last video hit a million views. I think y’all are singing a duet.”

Paige was the clear winner of the high-speed chase, followed by Iona, Jazz, and

Charlene. Of course, Charlene had driven most of the course backward, so that was no surprise. He'd looked forward to one-on-one time since he needed to choose three more women to send home. He learned that Paige didn't eat donuts and she spent most of their date lecturing him on the evils of refined sugar.

A few hours later, the familiar smell of beer and chili fries greeted him as he entered Susie's Bar. Tonight's date was designed to help everyone cut loose with bottomless pitchers of beer and karaoke.

"I heard we've got a duet tonight. Have you picked out a song?" Marina asked as she walked up to him with a frozen daiquiri in her hand.

"I've got a couple in mind but haven't settled on one yet."

"You mean you forgot?"

Al grinned. "You know me so well. How about you surprise me?"

Marina's eyes sparkled. "I know the perfect song." She ran over to DJ Sharkman's table and began flipping through his songbook.

Al noticed Diane in the corner, checking over her camera. "Hey, Diane, you also film scenes with the women at the beach house, right? Not just the dates."

"Yes," she answered warily.

"Got any advice for me? Some kind of inside scoop? I'm sure you've seen a different side of them."

Diane snorted. "You got that right."

“And?” he asked.

Diane looked around the room furtively, motioning him to come in closer.

“What is it?”

“I shouldn’t say this, but ...” She paused, taking another sweep of the room.

“What?” Al leaned in closer.

“One of the girls ...”

“Yeah?” His eyes widened.

She cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered, “Wants to suck your dick.” She leaned back from him, nodding.

“Wait, what?” Al reared his head. “That’s an insider scoop? I would think they would all want to ... wait, did you say one? Are you saying only one of them wants to ...” He ran his hand through his hair.

Diane’s lip trembled until she finally lost it and howled with laughter. “Oh my God, Al. You should have seen your face! I totally should have recorded that.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Damn it, Diane! I should have known better than to ask one of the Williams demons.”

“Oh, come on, you know I have to mess with you a little. They aren’t that different when you aren’t around. The mean one is mean, the sweet one is sweet. The wild one is wild.”

“Not helpful, Diane. Have you picked up on anything else? Like someone who’s not here for the right reasons?” He didn’t know what that meant, or why it was so important, but Marina had stressed that point. Apparently, weeding out at least one contestant who wasn’t there for “the right reasons” was expected.

“Well, I don’t know about their reasons, but those twins freak me out. They weren’t kidding about doing everything together. Eat, sleep, bathe. Everything. As models, I’m sure it’s safe to assume they were hoping for a career boost with an appearance on the show.”

“A hot night with twins is one thing, but long term? I’m not even sure that’s legal. Mercedes is fun. I know Iona is a bit forward, but I guess I could get used to it.”

“Yeah, that’s one word for it.” Diane grinned.

“What do you think about Jazz? We haven’t had a lot of time together, but she’s almost too normal for a show like this. I keep waiting for the catch.”

“Oh, she’s great. Her sister signed her up as a joke, which is why she doesn’t seem like the type. She made it through the first couple rounds of casting and decided what

the hell. It was a free trip to the beach and a good excuse to take time off work.”

Al’s brow furrowed. “You seem to know a lot about her.”

Diane’s cheek’s reddened and she tucked a strand of blue hair behind her ear. “There’s a lot of downtime when we’re filming, and she’s easy to talk to.” She cleared her throat. “Charlene is a sweetheart. If you get a chance to talk to her one on one, ask her about kids.”

“Kids?” Al gulped.

“Yeah, my guess is she wants a boatload and is ready to start tomorrow.”

Sweat beaded on Al’s brow. “Okay, well, good chat.” He stood up as his six-ish dates arrived.

“Let’s get this party started!” Mercedes shouted as she walked into the room, arms linked with the twins. Mercedes was of course in a tight fitting dress that accentuated her breasts. The twins were in skin-tight jeans with identical skimpy tops. Al grinned as he watched the ladies settle in. It was nice that they were getting along. There was a special area set up on the back patio for one-on-one chats, and he hoped to have a few minutes with each woman before the date was over.

His smile faded as he watched Shane enter the bar with Jeannie at his side. He whispered something in her ear, and she laughed. Give me a break. That man was not funny. He was old and stupid. Okay, so maybe he was like, ten years older than Al, but still. She swatted at his chest and kissed him on the cheek. Son of a bitch. When did they get to that stage? He thought they were just flirting. Were they fucking now? Damn it.

Lindsey clapped her hands. “Okay people, I hope you’ve rested your voices because

everyone is singing tonight. Al, why don't you go first? It'll be a good way to set the tone."

Al nodded. Oh yeah, he was ready to set the tone.

Chapter 24

"That was an interesting choice," Lindsey said to Jeannie as Al walked off the stage. "Any idea what that was about? I don't think we'll be able to air it; it's not quite fitting with our aesthetic."

"Yeah, you're right about that," Jeannie said. Morgan Wallen's "Thinkin' Bout Me" would definitely raise some eyebrows. The song was about a guy taunting his ex for thinking about him while she's dating someone new.

The sound of cheers and clinking glass interrupted their conversation.

"When you need a spotter for your squats, are you thinkin' bout me?" Paige asked and the women cheered and clanked their glasses.

"When you're locked up and need someone to get you out, are you thinkin' bout me?" Jazz shouted, followed by another round of cheers.

"When you have to carry all her shit, are you thinkin' bout me?" Mercedes squeezed her breasts together, laughing into Diane's camera.

Jeannie turned to Lindsey. "Maybe leave it in. I guess he was singing on behalf of the women and their exes." Her shoulders dropped while her heart sank. For a second, she thought maybe that song was directed at her. That maybe Al was taunting her, reading her thoughts because she was thinking about him while she flirted with Shane.

Marina sang a slow song that Al and Paige danced to as part of Paige's reward for winning the day's challenge. After that, the women enjoyed karaoke while Al had one-on-one time with each contestant.

Jeannie was dying to know what they were saying on the patio. No one would question her if she went outside to listen. Part of her job was to keep up with the contestants and storyline. Before she could decide what to do, her phone vibrated in her pocket.

Nick: Checking on the rookie. Rough day at the station yesterday.

She sucked in a breath as she read Nick's text. Al had been acting off all night. No matter what else was going on with them, he was her best friend and always would be. She quickly typed out a reply and walked outside to the one-on-one set.

"And then I followed the mama dog through the woods and found a whole litter of puppies, trapped in a hole left from a rotted-out stump. I carried all six of them back to my house. I have a picture. Want to see?" Charlene's wide eyes stared up at Al, which might have been sweet if he'd been looking back at her instead of staring off in the opposite direction.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Oh, sorry, um ...” He jolted upright, looking around at the crew. Jeannie stifled a laugh. The poor guy had no clue what he’d been asked. Shane winked and tapped his watch. Al visibly relaxed. “I’m sorry, Charlene, but our time has run out. I hope you enjoy your night.”

She hesitated a few seconds, as if waiting for something more. A goodbye kiss? Jeannie snorted. Not on my watch.

“Al! I have a few things to run over with you before your next song.” Jeannie walked over to the outdoor couch and stared at Charlene until she finally took the hint and left.

Jeannie flopped into the open seat as the crew moved out of the area. “How’s it going?” she asked.

“Fine,” Al answered. He was looking at his feet, with his legs spread in a wide V and his elbows resting on his knees.

“You sure about that?” she asked, knocking him in the shoulder. “That karaoke solo was a bit ... ragey.”

He chuckled under his breath. “You caught that, huh?”

“Uh, yeah. I think everyone did. What’s going on?”

He sighed and leaned back against the couch, shifting his focus to the stars instead of his feet. “It’s nothing.”

Jeannie nibbled her lip. Al wasn't usually one to keep things from her, so whatever happened must have been bad. "Did you talk to Ben?"

"No, but the lawyer emailed and said the transfer was approved, so at least something is going right."

"Well, if it's not Ben that's got you in such a funk, what is it?" She paused, waiting for him to speak. After a few minutes of silence, she pushed her leg against his. "Come on, Al. It's me."

He sat up and turned toward her, eyes blazing with heat as he stared directly into hers. "Oh, Jeannie-girl, I know exactly who is sitting next to me right now."

Jeannie sucked in a breath as her brain temporarily short-circuited. He lifted a hand to stroke her cheek, the intimacy sending a bolt of lightning straight to her core.

"Nick texted," she suddenly remembered, breaking the spell.

Al jerked his hand away, his eyes narrowing. "And what did Beast say?"

"He wanted to check on you." She reached over and grabbed his hand. "What happened? Why are you acting this way?"

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "I had a call at Weeping Willow yesterday. For solicitation."

Jeannie's heart lurched. "And how is the old bitch?" she spit out.

"About the same. Minus a few teeth."

Her eyes widened. "And her, uh, personality?"

Al's laugh lacked humor. "Exactly the same."

"I'm so sorry you still have to deal with her." She lifted his arm over her shoulder and snuggled into his side, wrapping her arms around his torso. "You know she's full of shit, right? Well, full of crack or meth or whatever she's on these days. Nothing she said to you was true."

"You don't even know what she said."

"Oh, I bet I can guess. And I bet I can also kick out the rest of her teeth so she can't say anything else."

Al laughed and squeezed her tight, kissing the top of her head. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course I would." She leaned back so that she could look into his eyes. "I can't think of a person's ass that I wouldn't kick for you."

"And that's why you're my best friend." Al smiled, leaning down to touch his forehead to hers. "My very best friend. That is what we are, right, Jeannie-girl? Friends?" His voice had gone from teasing to growling, lighting a fire right in her belly.

"Uh huh," she whispered, unable to say anything else as she raised her lips to his.

"Ahem!" Diane cleared her throat as she walked up to the couch. "Al, they need you inside. They want to film a confessional about your thoughts on the one-on-ones."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“This has been so much fun.” Marina stood next to Jeannie, placing an arm around her waist. “Thanks for hooking me up.”

Jeannie smiled. “I figured you’d enjoy being part of a dating show.”

“It’s been the greatest! I can’t wait to watch once it comes out.”

“And your solo was beautiful, as always. I’m sure we’ll get a ton of offers once the episode airs.” Jeannie glanced at Marina, trying to gauge her interest.

“Yeah, I guess that might be cool,” Marina said with a shrug.

Interesting ...

“Speaking of offers, when I was in New York—”

Marina raised her hand and shook her head. “Nope! Stop right there!” She laughed. “I am still a newlywed and want to wake up next to my husband every day. But give me a few more months and I’m sure I’ll be ready for a break.”

Jeannie grinned. Marina might be ready for a break, but Christian? Never. The sheriff was beyond smitten.

“Marina!” Lindsey walked in from outside. “Al’s finished his confessional, and it’s time for you two to sing your duet. Something somber, if you don’t mind. We need

the girls looking all forlorn and shit, because after this, we're headed back to the Holding Cell for the arraignment."

Marina shot a questioning look to Jeannie.

Jeannie smirked. "AKA the beach house and the 'rose' ceremony."

"Ahh," Marina said, eyes twinkling. "Clever!"

"I know, right?" Lindsey said. "Let me go grab Al."

Marina turned to Jeannie and gave her a hug. "Love you, friend. Remember that." Marina walked over to DJ Sharkman to get ready.

That wasn't suspicious at all. What the hell kind of song had she chosen. Jeannie racked her brain for popular duets. "The Girl is Mine?" "It Wasn't Me?" Maybe "Put it in Your Mouth" by Akinyele? That would be hilarious, but Marina would never have chosen that song. Christian would have to kill Al, and that would mess up his job as sheriff.

"Oops, I'm sosorry!"

Jeannie sucked in a breath as a splash of cold liquid coated her back. She turned to find Iona smirking with an empty beer mug. "I didn't see you standing there," she sneered, walking off to join the women and leaving Jeannie to drip.

She rolled her eyes and stalked to the storage room, knowing Susie kept extra uniform shirts back there for just such an occasion. She quickly changed her shirt, not wanting to miss the duet. As she stepped into the hall, she heard whispers from the shadows.

Narrowing her eyes, she walked toward the voice only to see Jazz, hunched over by the back door, talking on a cell phone that Jeannie knew for a fact contestants weren't allowed to have. She debated saying something when she heard DJ Sharkman calling Marina and Al to the stage.

Jazz forgotten, Jeannie hurried back to the front room as the beginning notes played. Recognizing the song, Jeannie looked up and whispered a silent prayer. That was the only way she'd be able to make it through "If the World Was Ending" without breaking down. Damn Marina for choosing that song. And damn that Diane too. She'd sneaked in next to Jeannie with her camera so that when Al sang his verses, it felt like he was looking straight at her.

Nodding her head, she looked back at him. Yes, Al. If the world was ending, I'd come over.

Chapter 25

Al took in a deep breath as he looked out at the women in the Holding Cell. The evidence briefcase only held three cards, meaning three ladies of interest (or three-ish) would go home tonight.

At this point, he knew it was better to rip the band-aid off rather than stall.

"Let's do this," he said to Lindsey, who clapped her hands.

"Okay, people! This is arraignment number three. We shoot straight through, no stopping for any reason. And go!"

Al reached for his first evidence card. This one was easy.

"Jazz."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Jazz walked over to him, her smile lighting up her face.

“I’ve enjoyed getting to know you. I think you’re intelligent, thoughtful, and of course, gorgeous.”

Jazz smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“We have a lot in common, and I’d like to spend more time with you. Will you accept this evidence of attraction?”

“I will,” she said and added the card to her necklace and returned to the bench with the other women.

Al took a deep breath. “Iona.”

Iona stood up and sauntered to the front of the room in a navy-blue strapless dress.

“I think you are unique, and I enjoy how you challenge me. I am very interested in seeing where this relationship can go.” Was he though? Hard to say, but it was one of Marina’s key phrases. “Will you accept this evidence of attraction?”

Iona smirked. “Of course I will.” She lifted her crimson hair and turned around so Al could unfasten her necklace. Slipping the card on the chain, she lowered her lashes and repeated the gesture, forcing Al to touch her again to latch the chain. She pressed her body against his, pushing her ass against the front of his pants. Her dress came up to her mid-thigh, and in another lifetime, he might have enjoyed her efforts. But not now. He stepped back, freeing himself from her touch.

Shane cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Ladies, there’s only one card left. Al, please let the jury know your verdict.”

Al fought the urge to roll his eyes. Their use of legal terms was like those memes of Chinese menus translated into English. The kind where Chop Suey gets turned into Chopped Up Susie.

“I am grateful I could meet each and every one of you. You are all special and have a lot to offer someone. But I have to go with my gut, and my gut is telling me that Mercedes should receive the last card tonight.”

Mercedes jumped from the bunch and flew to Al, throwing her arms around his neck.

Al staggered back, chuckling. “So, I can assume you’ll accept this card into evidence?”

“Si!” she shouted, ripping the card from his hand and jumping in the air. Al stepped back quickly, not wanting to get knocked out by her tits.

Shane stepped next to Al, teeth tugging his bottom lip as he watched Mercedes celebrate.

Pervert.

“Paige. Charlene. Twins,” Shane said, looking at the three-ish women of interest. “I’m sorry but there’s not enough evidence of attraction. Your cases are dismissed.”

Al stepped back and waited. Marina had told him that the longer the show went on, the longer the women would need to say goodbye to each other.

“Loser,” Paige shouted as she stalked from the room, not bothering to say goodbye.

“As if I wanted to go out with someone who feeds their date simple carbs!”

“I don’t even know what that means!” he called after her, turning as Charlene walked up to him.

“It was the doughnuts,” she managed to get out between shuddering breaths. “You should have offered her celery sticks.” Her eyes filled with tears, and she ran from the room.

“Right. Well, okay then.” He shrugged.

The twins walked up next, holding hands.

“We had a good time and,” began Desiree.

“We hope you find love,” finished Delilah.

“See you at the reunion!” they said together, waving as they walked away.

If only finding love was the problem. What he needed to do was hide it in a box and bury it so deep that he’d never have to think about it again.

Chapter 26

“Al, we’re down to the final three women. Iona, Jazz, and Mercedes. How are you feeling?” Shane sat across from Al on an oversized armchair.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“I’m excited and nervous. I’m falling for each of these women, but for different reasons.” Bile rose in his throat at the lie, forcing him to pause as he swallowed it back down. Thankfully Marina had coached him well on what to say. His gaze flickered to Jeannie, who stood behind the camera, scribbling into her notepad.

“Mercedes matches my personality well, and I know we’ll always have fun together. Jazz and I have a lot in common. We’re both dedicated to our jobs in the justice system, and she’d be understanding if I had to work overtime on a big case. And Iona, well yeah. What can I say about her? She’s a gorgeous, strong woman. We’ll challenge each other, so life will always be interesting.”

Shane laughed into the camera, then turned back to Al. The dude was so fake. Al had no idea what Jeannie saw in him and his perfect fucking teeth.

“Sounds like you have quite the dilemma ahead of you, but maybe this will help. The next round of dates will all be solo, giving you a chance to get to know the women even better. At the end of the evening, you’ll have the chance to offer the women this.” He handed over a keycard. “This opens the honeymoon suite, where you both can choose to spend the night. No cameras, just the two of you, a hot tub, and a mirror on the ceiling.” Shane laughed again and winked. “Just kidding about the mirror. Maybe.”

“Thanks, that sounds great.” Al gulped. He sneaked a glance at Jeannie again. Her head was down, focused on that damn notepad as if she refused to even look at him.

“And cut!” Lindsey shouted. “Great scene, everybody. Al, you’re done for today. Crew, take ten and then we’ll have a quick meeting.”

Jeannie bolted from the room before anyone could stop her. He was desperate to talk to her, but what would they even say? In the old days, they would have sat down over drinks and Jeannie would have offered her best tips on wooing the ladies. But now ...

Al crossed his arms over his chest. Now, she couldn't even stand to look him in the eye when the overnight dates were mentioned. Could that mean she was jealous? Al grinned. In all the years they'd been friends, Jeannie had never been jealous of his dates. Maybe their one night together meant more to her than she was willing to let on. The weight in his chest lifted a little. Two more eliminations. That was all that was left. A couple of dates and two eliminations. Then he'd collect his paycheck and go after his girl.

Chapter 27

I'm sorry, but we no longer desire to use your marketing services. We'd like to cancel our contract at the end of the month.

Jeannie jolted up from her phone as Lindsey's shrill whistle tore through the room.

"Great work, folks! We have a few low-key days where we're taping confessionals with the women and Al. Then we'll have the overnight dates." She paused as snickers of laughter filled the room.

Jeannie tried to hold back her disgust. As if it wasn't enough that she'd been let go by the third client this week because she'd been too busy focusing on the show, now she had to think about Al bedding a bunch of women. Although, after the other night at Susie's, maybe she was wrong. Was it possible he felt the same way she did after their night together and only went along with the show because she insisted? Her fingers reached up to her lips, remembering the way Al's had felt there. What if—

"After three passion-filled nights in the honeymoon—no, excuse me—conjugal suite,

we'll be down to two women of interest. We'll head to New York City to film the last dates and final arraignment. So tonight, have a few sips, and enjoy a few slow days. Then gear up because the job's not done yet!" Lindsey raised her glass and the sound of cheers competed with clinking glasses around the set.

"Conjugal suites? Is she kidding with that? Is that even a thing anymore?" Diane asked Jeannie.

"Um, honestly, I don't know. I can't imagine Christian allowing something like that in his jail cells."

"Son of a bitch!" Diane shook her head and laughed. "No wonder Hope never complained about working late. I'll bet that little hussy was watching."

"Eww!" Jeannie exclaimed, grateful to have something to take her mind off her imploding career and Al's overnight dates. The jail cells in the back of the sheriff's office were small, like a bank vault with a twin bed, stainless steel toilet, and a tiny window in the door. But her mind drifted to those old-timey cells like in Mayberry, with iron bars so the deputies could always see what was happening. Bars she could hold on to when Al showed up in his uniform and railed her from behind.

"Earth to Jeannie! You sure you've got wine and not moonshine in there?"

"Oh sorry, girl. I was daydreaming. What did you say?"

"I was asking what you thought of the final three. Who do you think Al will choose? And who should he choose?"

Jeannie sighed. So much for taking her mind off things. "I think all the remaining women are great. But Mercedes might be too much of a party girl. Al has changed so much since becoming a deputy and I'm not sure he'd be able to keep up with her, or

if he'd even want to."

Diane nodded. "Good point. If he sends her home, I hope she invites me to her pity party. I'm sure it will be epic."

Jeannie laughed. "Iona is gorgeous and confident and would be a good match for him. But she is the villain of the show, and she's said some pretty mean stuff. Al doesn't have a mean bone in his body, so I'm not sure how that would play out if he does pick her."

"Could be pretty awkward when they watch the show later and he sees how she made Charlene cry after the go-kart race."

"Exactly." Jeannie took another sip from her glass. "And then there's Jazz. They have a lot in common work wise, and she lives a few hours away, so that could actually work."

Diane lifted her glass and chugged the rest of her wine. "You think so? Have they even, like, hooked up or anything?" Her eyes shifted around, probably looking for someone with a bottle so she could get a refill.

"Um, I don't think so." But she didn't really know. Maybe they had. Maybe he was enjoying being the bachelor and making out with everyone. The wine soured in her stomach. "She seems perfect on paper, there's just something ... I don't know."

"Something? What kind of something?" Diane leaned in closer. "You can tell me."

"I really shouldn't."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Diane made the zip your lips motion and nodded.

“Fine. I think she’s kind of sneaky. I’ve caught her a couple of times in places she wasn’t supposed to be, like rooms that are for the crew and off limits to contestants. And I know they aren’t allowed to have phones, but I caught her talking on one at Susie’s.”

“Well, she is a fancy attorney back home. Maybe she sneaked a phone to keep up with a case.”

“I guess so.” Jeannie shrugged. “With all the bad luck I’ve had lately, I’m probably being paranoid.”

“Good talk.” Diane patted Jeannie’s shoulder. “I need to put away some of the equipment before I leave out of here. See you around!”

“Oh, okay. Bye!” Jeannie watched her walk toward the other camera operators who were almost finished breaking down for the night. Diane was right. She was being too hard on Jazz. So what if she was hiding a phone? Mercedes probably had a laptop in her bra. The image of Mercedes pulling a MacBook from her tits made her chuckle. Now that would be an amazing marketing campaign.

Which reminded her, she had an email from Victor Crawford that she’d left unread. He’d also sent text messages which she’d ignored. But with nothing better to do, she pulled out her phone and opened the email.

Ms. Knight,

We've recently had a senior marketing position open up, which I think you'd be great for. I understand your hesitation to come in at the bottom when you've already had success for several years. With this position, you'll be in charge of a team of marketers, and you'll get to select the clients you work with. Give me a call if you'd like to discuss it. Or, if you're ever back in the city, we can meet for dinner, and I'll give you a tour of our offices.

V. Crawford

Jeannie blinked. Holy cow. A senior position, responsible for a team of people? Not bad for a girl with only a high school diploma and a couple of online certificates. She'd been hesitant to leave Grimm County before. Well, not so much Grimm County, but Al. The town wasn't so bad, but her childhood memories took up too much real estate in her mind. But as long as Al was by her side, the memories faded.

What would happen to her if he ended up with one of these women? She doubted any of the remaining three ladies would be happy for him to have a female best friend. And if the show took off and Al got more offers? They might leave Grimm County altogether, and he'd probably hire someone with more experience to be his publicist. And where would that leave her? Alone and jobless, like her mother. Like hell, she thought, as she typed a response to Victor.

Chapter 28

Al picked through the array of sandwiches on the table, hunting for his favorite, grilled chicken with avocado and Swiss. One of the best things about working with a television show was the catered lunches. When he first started with the sheriff's office, he earned a reputation for being a huge eater, usually grabbing two plates worth of free food. He played it off as needing fuel for his intense workouts, but he was really snagging it to take home to Jeannie.

Even now, years later, it was hard to resist taking an extra sandwich for later. But whether that was the trauma from food insecurity or because the new bakery in town was fire, he'd worry about later.

Grabbing a white chocolate and cranberry cookie and a cup of sweet tea, he looked around the dining area for an open seat.

"Hunter!" he called out, walking to where his colleague sat next to Diane. "What're you doing here?" He looked over at Diane. "Is it Bring Your Brother to Work Day?"

She snickered. "Of course not. But I had an idea for a scene, and we needed Hunter's expertise."

"Oh, some kind of nerdy shit?" Al took a bite of his sandwich, groaning as the flavors hit his mouth. He'd have to post about the bakery on his social media. So many new businesses didn't make it, and his stomach would be devastated if this place was one of them. What was the name again? Big Blue's Bakery? No, that wasn't it. Little Red's Deli? He shrugged. Jeannie would know.

He needed to find out if the remaining ladies of interest could cook. Maybe that could be worked into a challenge. If he had to take a guess, Mercedes had the best chance. She had that whole "taught by Grandma" vibe. Iona seemed more of the order-in type, and Jazz, well ... He scrunched his nose. She had microwave meals and leftover Chinese written all over her.

"Something like that," Diane said, bringing him back to the conversation "We have to clean up those rooms in the Holding Cell. I thought it'd be funny if we had a scene where Hunter checked out all the beds and couches with his magic light." She grinned, and Al knew which light she was referring to. The one that showed whether any fluids were present.

Al chuckled. If Hunter wanted to waste his day off shining a flashlight around, that was his business. But their family was pretty tight, so maybe he'd wanted to hang out with Diane. Al had done lamer shit before to hang out with Jeannie.

Hunter nudged Al with his elbow. "I gotta say, man, I'm impressed. I'm only halfway through the house and I've already found five of your hot spots. How you managed to bang all over the house and not get caught is amazing. You are a master of stealth. I'm just glad you're on our side now." He pointed to the badge on his vest.

Al set his sandwich on the plate, suddenly losing his appetite. "What are you talking about?" He hadn't had sex with any of the contestants. He hadn't even kissed any of them, much to Lindsey's disappointment.

"Dude, it's okay." Hunter patted him on the back. "You're on a dating show and you're supposed to propose soon. No one will fault you for getting to know some of the ladies a little better."

"But that's the thing. I haven't hooked up with any of them."

Diane looked up from her plate. "Well, I'm not sure which is worse. Either Al's a prude and this show is going to tank, or the cleaning people dropped the ball after the previous rental."

"Gross," Al said, picking his sandwich back up. "Where exactly did you—you know what, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

Hunter ate a handful of chips and looked up at the ceiling. That was his thinking pose, and Al knew to give him a few minutes.

He cleared his throat and looked at Diane, then over to Al, his eyes scrunching. "It's more likely that the cleaning crew did do their job, given that the owner wouldn't

want to jeopardize any repeat business from the entertainment folks. The more likely scenario is that someone during this rental was having sex on the pool table. And on the couch. And on the bean bag chair. And—”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Enough!” Al shook his head. What the fuck? Okay, so he couldn’t be too much of a hypocrite because technically he was cheating on these women from the start. But it was different because they knew the deal when they auditioned.

“Can you tell how old the, uh, deposits, are?” he asked while Diane choked on her potato salad.

“Jesus, Al,” she said between coughs. “Deposits?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Not really.” Hunter pounded his sister on the back. “Or at least, not well enough to determine if they were done by someone who was sent home weeks ago. I’m guessing that’s what you’re getting at?”

Al nodded. “Yeah. Diane, what do you think? You’ve been filming the women when I’m not around. That’s probably when all this fucking is happening. Have you seen any of the women hooking up with someone else?”

Diane shook her head, looking a light shade of green. “Nope. Nothing at all.”

“Damn, well, do me a favor and keep an eye out, okay? I won’t say anything to embarrass them on camera. I can always come up with an excuse to send them home. I just need to be sure I’m not picking someone who is into someone else. They might not want to do the wedding show in that case.”

“The wedding show? Are you seriously considering that?” Hunter’s mouth dropped.

“Yeah? I mean, no. I don’t know.” His eyes searched the room, looking for Jeannie.

“Okay, well, good luck with that.” Hunter shook his head. “While I’m here, there’s something else I wanted to talk to you about. Work related.”

“And that’s my cue.” Diane stood up and grabbed the empty plates from the table. “Hunter, when you’re ready, we’ll film in the kitchen next.”

Al shuddered, thankful the food they’d eaten had been catered. “What’s up?”

“I looked into that case you asked me about, and I think you have reason to be concerned.”

“Seriously? What did you find?”

“I don’t want to say too much now, but how about you tell me what you know? I saw your name mentioned a few times in connection with Ben’s priors, so I’m guessing you have first-hand knowledge about how a loitering complaint turned into a conviction for drug trafficking and attempted murder.”

Al snorted. “I wish I could. I’ve been trying to figure that out for years. It all started with laundry detergent and a MILF.” He sighed and told Hunter about the last day he’d spent with Ben outside of prison.

“Shit, do you hear that?”

Al looked up from the massive trunk of the Buick, full of Tide detergent bottles. “Sirens?”

“Yeah,” Ben answered. “That damn Trixie.”

Al shook his head and laughed. “You shouldn’t have hooked up with her mom.”

“Aw, come on. You’ve seen Mrs. Anderson. She’s so hot. How could I not hit that?”

Al slammed the trunk closed and tossed Ben the keys. “Come on, let’s get out of here. We’ll send out a new drop date and get these sold later.”

“Can you believe what our life has come to? Black market laundry detergent dealers?” Ben sat in the driver’s seat and laughed.

Al shrugged as he buckled his seat belt. “It could be worse. We could be slinging burgers forty hours a week. What was it our teachers always said? ‘Work smarter, not harder.’”

Ben turned the key to crank the car, but nothing happened. “Ah shit.” He tried again, but the car would not start.

“Don’t do this to me, Ben,” Al warned. “We gotta go. The sirens are getting louder.”

“Come on, come on,” Ben whispered to his car. “You can do it, Bertha.” After a few more tries, he slammed his hand on the dashboard. “Fuck!”

“There’s still time. We can make a run for it.” Al opened the door and stepped out.

“I know you’ve been working out, but even you can’t run carrying fifty bottles of liquid Tide.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Screw the Tide. We’ll come back for it later. We need to get out of here.”

“If Trixie told them I was here, I’m sure she told them why. They’ll have a warrant to search the car, which is in my name. I’m screwed either way. But you’re not. You get out of here, and I’ll catch up with you tomorrow.”

“Ben, I’m not leaving you to take the fall.”

“Al,” Ben laughed. “It’s fucking Tide. Not gold bars from Fort Knox. How do they know I’m not starting a new laundry business? Worst case, I’ll have to go downtown for a few hours. See if you can scrounge up a couple hundred dollars for bail, just in case.”

“Fine.” Al rolled his eyes. “Be smart, okay. They don’t call that deputy Beast for no reason. As long as you don’t provoke him, he won’t kick your ass.”

“Yeah, yeah, just get going.”

“According to the case notes, the anonymous tip said he was dealing drugs, not selling Tide. Based on that, and what they found in the car, maybe Ben had a side gig he hadn’t told you about.”

“There’s no way. Trixie might have said the drug thing to get back at him, but it wasn’t true. Ben would have never done anything that would have put Jeannie at risk.”

“Where do you think the drugs came from?”

“My best guess is they came from one of their mom’s boyfriends. She always had a steady string of them, and I wouldn’t put it past her to let them store shit at her house, especially if they offered her money. Did Ingall interview any of them?”

Hunter shook his head. “Doesn’t look like it. Once Ingall found the gun in Ben’s room that matched the casings from a drive by, he didn’t need to look anymore.”

Al nodded. “Ben had never seen that gun before they pulled it from under his bed. If Ingall was such a shit deputy, how did he find something Ben didn’t even know he had?”

Hunter rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s a good question. I’ll keep digging, and I think it’s time to bring Christian in on this.”

“Thanks, Hunter. I appreciate it. If what you’re thinking is true, this could be a bad look for the office.”

“Screw that. If there’s an innocent guy in jail, he should get out ASAP, no matter what. And I know Christian would feel the same way.”

“Jeannie and I have been hustling ever since to raise money for a new attorney who could bring in a private forensic analyst. I checked the file out my first year but wasn’t sure what I was looking at.”

“And you didn’t think to ask me?” Hunter asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Dude, come on. In the beginning, I was just the pretty face for the reality show. No one took me seriously. I figured I’d be better off making sure I kept my job and waiting to hire the lawyer. Which we have, finally, thanks to this show.”

Hunter nodded. “Well, we’re here now. Have the attorney give me a call. We’ll

compare notes, and maybe you won't need that private forensic analyst and you can stop doing dumb shit for money." Hunter gave him a pointed stare, then stood up and put on his goggles. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I've got to shine the light on some secret liaisons."

Chapter 29

"Well, well, well." Christian rubbed his hands together. "Our little Al is growing up. It's about damn time!" He raised his beer mug into the air, foam sloshing over the top as it collided with the other mugs.

"He's been whoring so long, I was worried he might never slow down. Least, not before the syphilis took him," Mr. Bill added, playing with the zipper on his purple velour track suit. Which he was wearing shirtless. Obviously.

Al rolled his eyes and glanced at his watch. Lindsey had insisted on a "family advice" scene before they left town with the final three women. Unfortunately, Al had no family, at least none that he wanted to admit to. Jeannie said she'd handle it and had convinced Christian, Nick, and Mr. Bill to participate. He was still in shock. Well, not so much about Christian. Jeannie had probably talked to Marina first and she would have made Christian participate. And Mr. Bill, well, it made sense to have an elder-type person, and better Mr. Bill than Ms. June. But Nick? He had no idea how she'd managed to convince him to film a scene. It was like pulling teeth to get him to tape for Grimm County Lawmen.

The table went awkwardly silent, the three of them sipping their beers while Lindsey glared from the side. What was he supposed to do? He'd never had one of these conversations before.

Nick prodded Christian with his elbow, nodding toward Christian's hand.

“Oh! Right.” He raised his palm, lowering his eyes to look underneath. “You are two dates away from proposing. What will you be looking in order to make your decision?”

“Oh, good question, Sheriff Prude.” Mr. Bill tipped his glass toward Christian before taking a sip.

“Yeah, that actually is a really good question.” Al’s brow furrowed. Lindsey was grinning now. “But, um, I guess I’m looking for someone with wife material.” Whatever the fuck that meant.

“The fuck does that mean?” Nick asked.

Al groaned. “I have no idea. I heard it somewhere.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“It’s different for everyone,” Mr. Bill answered. “For some, like our sheriff here, wife material includes stellar cooking skills. Someone who can whip up a perfect Sunday meal and have dinner on the table every night.” Mr. Bill’s eyes twinkled as he looked at the sheriff. They were neighbors, and Mr. Bill knew full well how disastrous Marina’s cooking skills were.

“Someone who cares for you.” They all turned to look at Nick, shocked that he was taking part in the conversation. “Makes soup when you’re sick. Buys snacks you like, even if she hates them. Wife is for life. Little things matter.”

Al paled. A wife is for life. The twenty thousand dollar wedding show bonus would be nice, but the only person he’d ever pictured himself marrying was Jeannie.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself, Beast.” Christian patted his friend on the shoulder. “So, tell us, Al, what are the little things that matter to you?”

“Someone I can laugh with. I learned growing up in the trailer park, you can get through even the most dismal circumstance if you can laugh.”

“That’s an excellent one.” Mr. Bill nodded. “My Peggy Sue was always quick to laugh, which was good because no one else thought my jokes were funny.”

Al scratched his chin, thinking more about the question. “I also like a woman who can solve problems. Like assess the situation, figure out what needs to be done. If she needs my help, I’m here for that. But if she can handle it on her own, well, that’s damn sexy in my book.”

“Anything else?” Christian asked.

“Uh, well, someone who is kind. Kindness is huge. My mom was a nightmare.” He shrugged when he saw Lindsey flinch, but the three men all nodded in agreement. “I’ve seen enough meanness to last a lifetime, so I want someone kind.”

“Laughter, problem solver, kind. Know someone like that?” Nick asked, pinning him with a glare.

“I, uh, well ...” He did know someone like that. Someone who lived right next to him and made his heart swell just thinking about her.

“What about their performance in the sack?” Mr. Bill asked.

“Damnit, Bill!” Christian scolded.

“The sack?” Al squeaked, glancing at the camera. “I’m not sure that’s really appropriate.”

“The hell it’s not.” Mr. Bill slapped his hand on the table. “You can’t marry someone without making sure you’re compatible first. Everyone knows that. Now what kind of woman do you want between the sheets? Kinky? Shy? Dominating?”

“Uh, well, I’m not talking about that.” Al buried his face behind his beer. Now was not the time to remember his night with Jeannie. The way her body melded into his, the way he came so hard he almost passed out.

The table grew silent again when Nick again pointed to Christian’s hand.

“Yep!” He sat up straight and peered at his palm. “What if the woman doesn’t want to live in North Carolina? Are you prepared to mow—uh, move—away?” Christian’s

head drew back.

“Move away? What the hell? Who said anything about moving? Are you moving, Al? Where did you get these ladies from? You know we have lots of great women here.”

“I haven’t talked to them about that yet. Mercedes is from Texas, and Iona is from somewhere. Jersey, maybe? I had assumed because they did the show, they were willing to move.”

Mr. Bill chuckled. “Boy, you must know better than that. You can’t assume a woman is going to pack up and move a bunch of states away just to be with you.”

“I can’t?” Al was confused. They already knew where he lived. And was this conversation even necessary? He wasn’t even sure he was going to propose. He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling hot and itchy all the sudden.

“Al, seriously, you cannot move away,” Christian said, setting his mug on the table. “You are a key member of the sheriff’s office. I don’t know anyone who could fill your shoes. I’d be gutted to lose you.”

Al’s hand dropped. What did his boss just say? He looked to the camera, then back at Christian. Right, the cameras. Damn, that man could put on a show.

“I’m not saying this because of the cameras, dumbass.”

Okay, was everybody a mind reader now?

“I’m saying this because I mean it. You are the heart of our department. I admit I originally hired you because I knew you’d be good for the show’s ratings and we needed the first season to be a success.”

Al shrugged and nodded. That was fair, and he wasn't offended. He'd only applied because of the show.

“And sure, the first year you spent more time taking selfies than statements.”

Again, fair. He had blown off the first year, thinking he was biding his time until a bigger offer came through. He went on calls, patrolled his beat, but his heart wasn't in it. But then Halloween came, and several of the kids in one of his neighborhoods had dressed up as Deputy Al. They walked around the neighborhood, escorting the younger kids and keeping them safe. And something inside Al shifted.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“It was like a switch flipped or something, and you started actually doing work. You became a real deputy. And with your past, uh,” he looked toward the camera and back at Al, “struggles, with law enforcement, you are perfectly empathetic with our citizens. You know exactly when to crack down and when to cut someone a break. I hope you find love, I really do, but please try to pick someone who won’t take you away from us.”

Nick grunted with a nod. “Been knowing you a long time. Good kid, even better man. Like having you around.”

Al’s throat tightened, and if they kept going, the tears that were threatening to come out might fall and embarrass him on TV. Although maybe that was okay. Emotionally available men were currently trending.

“Marriage is a partnership,” Mr. Bill added with a knowing smile. “And the number one necessity for a strong partnership is communication. So whoever you have feelings for, talk to her about what you want in a relationship and listen to what she wants. Being the star of the show doesn’t make your needs more important. If anything, your needs are gonna be in the toilet when she watches the replay of all your whoring.”

“I’ve not been—ugh, whatever. I appreciate all the advice. Anything else?” Al nodded toward Christian’s hand, where he was pretty sure Marina had written him a cheat sheet.

Christian took a final peek. “Keep your eyes open and you might find that the thing you’ve been looking for has been in front of you the whole time.” He shrugged.

“Did you read that off a fortune cookie?” Mr. Bill asked.

“Um, not a fortune cookie, no. Why, you got a better line?” Christian asked.

“Yes.” Mr. Bill rubbed his hands together and placed them flat on the table. “Your heart will know before your brain does. And once they are both in sync, put a ring on it.”

“Thanks. Nick? Any last pearls of wisdom before I head out?”

“Don’t fuck it up. A good woman will forgive you, but she’ll have a limit. Don’t push past her limit.”

Al nodded. That was good advice. But what was Jeannie’s limit? Not that it mattered. But if it did matter. Did she have a limit, and had things already gone too far?

Chapter 30

Al wiped the sweat from his brow. This shouldn’t be so difficult. A beautiful woman sat across from him. They’d had a fun day of deep-sea fishing full of great conversation. Somewhere on the floors above them waited a completely paid for honeymoon suite. Most likely with chilled champagne and a bed covered in rose petals.

An awkward silence settled between them as Jazz looked over to the camera. Diane was back on shift. With the amount of hours she was putting in, she must really enjoy the work. Hopefully that meant she would join the Grimm County Lawmen crew when they started taping. He’d missed teasing Hope, so it would be good to have another of Hunter’s sisters around.

Al rubbed his hand over his face. Focus. Tonight was the first of his three overnight

dates. They were supposed to help him get to know the ladies better. Know, like in the Biblical sense.

He steadied his bouncing knee, trying to ignore the way the sea bass he'd eaten was threatening to come back up. He looked over at Lindsey, who was mouthing, "the key, the key."

"Jazz, I've had a lovely evening. We get along great, and on paper, I can see how our lifestyles would really complement each other."

Out of nowhere, Shane appeared, looking like a fancy waiter holding a plate covered with a silver dome. Okay, so maybe Mister Teen Idol still had a few moves.

Jazz's eyes widened as she glanced over at Al. He reached for his glass and took another sip of red wine.

"Well, okay then," she whispered, following his lead with her own glass.

Shane cleared his throat. "Al and Jazz, we're down to three women of interest. There's just one elimination before the final arraignment, and possibly, a proposal. I want to make sure there is no evidence left uncovered in the investigation for love. Therefore, I present you with a gift." He lifted the dome off of the plate. "This," he paused several long seconds while mugging for the camera, "is the key to the Conjugal Suite."

Jazz snorted, spitting her wine onto the table.

"Oh shit, are you okay?" Al jumped up and slapped her on the back.

Jazz waved Al away, laughing and choking as she wiped her face. "Please tell me he did not call that what I think he did."

Al grinned. “You mean the Conjugal Suite? Unfortunately, yes.”

“All good over there?” Shane called from his safe distance several feet away.

“Yes, all good. Sorry about that,” Jazz said, looking up at Shane, then back at Al. “Actually, I’m not feeling all that well. Maybe it was the fish?” She nibbled on her lip and looked toward the camera.

Al rubbed his stomach. “Now that you mention it, I don’t feel so good either.”

“I’d rather go to my room and lie down. I’m not sure what the night will bring.” She rubbed her stomach and groaned loudly. “But I’m pretty sure we aren’t ready to know each other like that.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Wow, I hate that our night turned out this way, but I totally agree.” They hugged each other goodnight, and the crew stopped filming.

“Well, that wasn’t ideal, but neither is food poisoning,” Lindsey said as she walked up to Al. He looked around the room, watching the crew break down the equipment. He hid a smile as he saw Diane palm the suite key. At least someone would get some use out of it.

“Make sure you get plenty of fluids tonight. You’ve got another day of filming tomorrow, and I need you in top form for Iona.” Al nodded, assuring Lindsey he’d take some medicine and stay hydrated. Although, his stomach was feeling a whole lot better. Now that his night had freed up, maybe he could check in with Jeannie and see if she wanted to finish their marathon of Constance Cairn, Vegetable Psychic.

Shane whipped off the dome covered plate with a flourish and proceeded to explain to Iona about the Conjugal Suite. Al tuned him out, unnerved by the feeling of déjà vu, having been in the exact same scenario with Jazz barely twenty-four hours ago. Although this time, Lindsey had taken fish off the menu.

Instead of deep-sea fishing, they’d spent the day at a spa and gone on a riverboat cruise through the sound. Iona had been very affectionate all day and was currently putting out all the right vibes for an overnight.

The familiar cramp returned to his belly. He’d stuck with liquids most of the day and had grilled chicken and mashed potatoes for dinner. Surely he wasn’t getting food

poisoning again? They needed to choose a different restaurant for tomorrow. Not that he'd gotten sick after leaving last night, but poor Jazz had probably spent the night worshipping the porcelain god.

Iona reached over and grabbed the keycard from the plate. "Shane, I think I speak for both of us when I say, hell yes! We need that suite tonight, don't we, baby?"

He hoped his grimace looked like a smile. His eyes roamed the room, searching for an answer that wasn't there. His gaze locked with Diane's, standing behind her camera. Poor girl must have picked up the food poisoning, because a few seconds later, she grabbed her stomach and ran out of the room.

Iona tapped her nail on the table. Maybe this was for the best. Jeannie and Shane had been making plans for a date over lunch. Shouldn't he try to move on?

"Right, I guess that sounds—" Before he could finish, a loud wail erupted throughout the hotel restaurant. Emergency lights flashed inside the room, and Al quickly shifted to deputy mode.

"It's okay, everybody, don't panic. Probably a false alarm, but we need everyone to move toward the exits. Meet by the light pole on the opposite end of the parking lot. Lindsey, make sure you check off everyone against your call sheet and let me know if anyone is missing."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, switching it off airplane mode. Clearing a hotel in an emergency would be a nightmare. As he headed toward the manager's desk to offer help, he felt a manicured hand scrape across his forearm.

"Where are you going? I thought you said we needed to wait outside," Iona purred into his ear.

Shit. He'd forgotten all about her. "I need to help clear the building. Until we know why the alarm went off, we need to treat it as if there is a life-threatening emergency. There could be a couple hundred people staying here. Some might be asleep or have a disability and need help getting down the stairs."

Iona's head reared back as she scrunched her nose. "But you're off duty."

"I may not be in uniform, but I'm always a deputy. I'm sorry, Iona, but you need to go outside, and I need to get to work."

Al couldn't help but grin as Iona stormed off, clearly disappointed with the night's turn of events. He should be disappointed, too, but wasn't. He glanced around the dining area to make sure the crew had exited, only to find Diane entering the room. She must not have been sick after all.

"Hey, that goes for you, too. Hunter would have my ass if anything happened to you."

"Yeah, yeah. I don't smell any smoke, although I was hoping to catch a few fireworks from Iona. Besides, I like this version of you. Serious Deputy Al. It'll be great for b-roll."

"Absolutely not. It's not worth the risk." When she didn't budge, Al crossed his arms. "Don't make me call your mother."

"Oh, now that's just dirty." The horn of a fire engine blared outside, competing with the still ringing alarm. "Fine. You win. Can I leave this camera here, or do you think the hotel will be closed for the rest of the night?"

"Best case, there's no fire and you'll be able to come back after the fire department gives the all clear. Maybe thirty minutes? Or if they find something, it could be

tomorrow morning. Assuming the whole place doesn't burn down, of course."

"For your sake, I hope it's a false alarm so you'll still have plenty of time to use your suite."

Al grimaced. "Oh, well, actually, there's a lot of paperwork to fill out during an incident like this. Even more so when you're off duty. I'll have to, like, fill out a timesheet and stuff."

Diane nodded. "Right. A timesheet. Hope said Christian is a stickler for that kind of thing."

"Exactly! So even if the hotel reopens, I'm afraid my night with Iona is wrecked. Such a shame." He shook his head as the weight on his shoulders lifted.

At that moment the fire marshal walked in, and as Al walked over to greet him, he noticed Diane had again snagged the suite key off the table.

Chapter 31

Jeannie looked backward at the mirror, checking to make sure her ass was fully covered in the short dress. Satisfied that she wouldn't be hosting a peep show, she turned to face the mirror and took in the full look. The gold dress was tight, hugging her curves in all the right places and showing enough cleavage to be distracting but not enough to risk a nip slip. Her hair was pulled high in her signature ponytail, with smoky eyes and bright red lips that would make any beauty influencer proud. It was more effort than she usually put into her dates, but then again, she didn't usually date movie stars.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“You are smart. You are beautiful. You are enough,” she said to her reflection. Al had read a self-help book a few years back and decided their self-esteem sucked and they needed to recite affirmations. Jeannie wasn’t sure if they worked, but she usually felt better after doing them. She wondered what Al’s affirmations were now. “You are sexy. You are a crime fighter. You are a dork.” She chuckled as she imagined Al staring into the mirror on the other end of the duplex. “You are about to spend the third night in a row with a different woman. You are going to propose soon.” She sighed as she grabbed her keys. No use crying over spilled milk.

“Honey, you look lovely!”

Shane greeted her as she entered the hotel bar with a kiss on the cheek. His white dress shirt was unbuttoned at the top, letting a patch of chest hair peek through. The shirt was tucked into a slim pair of black slacks, and he looked every bit the rich, stylish personality he portrayed on TV. She should be ecstatic, but she couldn’t stop thinking about what Al was doing several floors up. She’d purposely avoided the overnight date tapings, begging off when they got to the restaurant portion each day.

She hadn’t asked anyone what had happened; she didn’t need to. She knew Al, which meant she knew he must have spent the last two nights fucking beautiful women and was now on his third. Almost three months had passed since they’d hooked up. Maybe getting railed by a hot guy was what she needed.

Although ... Al had texted her last night. She didn’t respond, afraid to know what he might say. But surely he wouldn’t have texted her while he was in a room with

another woman? Maybe something had gone wrong.

Tomorrow he'd send another woman home, and then it would be time to go to New York for the final dates and arraignment. They hadn't talked about whether he was going to propose, but there was a chance. These shows always ended with a proposal. Maybe not with Mercedes; she didn't seem ready for that kind of commitment. But Iona or Jazz? Both of them screamed long term.

But she was done thinking about Al. She was on a date with Shane, and the way he was staring her up and down told her he was ready for some conjugal time.

"And that was how I scored my first movie credit when I was only ten." Shane flashed his brilliant smile, motioning to the waiter for a refill of his martini.

Jeannie stood up, needing a break from The Life and Times of Shane Ashton. Two hours and they were only at age ten. Hopefully it would get more interesting when he moved into his teen years.

"I'm going to run to the ladies' room to freshen up."

"Need another?" Shane asked, pointing to her gin and tonic.

"Yeah, that would be great, thank you."

Jeannie exited the restaurant and headed to the bathroom on the other side of the hotel lobby. She briefly considered making a run for it, but no, that wouldn't do. She had to stick this through. Had to try to move on, at least. And right now, Shane was the only dog sniffing around.

She had just entered the hallway that led to the bathroom when a hand covered her mouth and a strong arm wrapped around her from behind. She tried to fight, but it was no use. Her attacker was too strong, and she soon found herself dragged into a dark storage closet. He was a strong fucker and smelled amazing. Wait, she shouldn't be noticing that, but she couldn't help it. He smelled like ...

"You've been avoiding me, Jeannie-girl," Al rasped in her ear. He lowered his hand from her mouth, but still held her tight against him, her back to his front.

"Have I?" She turned her head slightly. "Maybe you've been too busy with your harem."

"Now that's not fair." He rubbed his face along her neck, his hot breath sending shivers down her spine. "I'm only doing what you asked me to. You wanted me to do the show, so I'm doing the show. But what are you doing, Jeanine? I never asked you to date that sparkle tooth tiger."

Jeannie sucked in a breath, her heart pounding with the nearness of him. "What do you want, Al? I need to get back." She wriggled against him, struggling to break free of his hold. But her body's reaction as she rubbed against his hardness made her want to do anything but.

"What do I want? Isn't it obvious?" He pushed his erection into her back.

"Al," she moaned. "Enough. What about Mercedes?"

Al huffed out a laugh. "She passed out during dinner. I carried her to the suite and put her to bed."

"But you're still here? Sharing a room with her?"

“Well, yeah. It’s Fight Night and the suite has a ninety-eight-inch television.”

Any other guy and she’d think he was full of shit. But Al? This tracked. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter. We shouldn’t do this.”

“Don’t say that. This is the only thing I’ve done in weeks that I am sure about. I swear, I feel like I’m losing my mind with the show, having to pretend to be someone I’m not.”

She craned her neck to look into his eyes. On the one hand, he was saying exactly what she wanted to hear. But on the other, “Ben needs us to be strong. It’s not enough for him to be transferred. We need to pay the lawyer to keep working on his case. His safety is more important than our ... our ...”

“Our what?” Al asked.

Relationship? Happily ever after? “Urges,” she whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Our urges?” he huffed. “This thing between us is a hell of a lot more than urges, and I think you know that. We belong together.”

“Well, you sure have a funny way of showing it.” Her core clenched as her arousal grew. Gah, if only her body would listen to her brain.

“You want me to show you how we belong, Jeannie-girl?” The hand around her waist lowered, gathering up the short hem of her skirt until it was bunched up around her middle. His fingers moved the scrap of her thong out of the way and swiped through her folds.

“So fucking wet. Did he make you like this? Did his chiseled jaw and perfectly gelled hair make your pussy drip?”

Jeannie moaned, biting her lip to stop from admitting that Shane hadn’t even come close to getting a reaction out of her.

His pace quickened as he rubbed against her clit, pushing harder until she felt the first flutters of an orgasm. “Tell the truth. If this was all for him, I can leave, let him finish you off.”

“Fine! Fuck it!” she gasped, and Al chuckled. “It’s you, Al. Only you.”

“That’s my good girl.” He pulled his fingers from her pussy and stepped back.

“Hey! You said—”

“Hands against the wall and spread your legs.”

She moved quickly, desperate to follow his command and not caring one bit that she was about to get fucked in a hotel supply closet.

He grabbed her panties and kneeled as he pulled them down her legs. “So fucking gorgeous, Jeannie-girl.”

His hands slid back up her legs as he stood up. A loud smack filled the tiny closet, accompanied by a sharp pain on her left butt cheek.

“Did you spank me?” she asked, equally appalled and turned on at the same time.

“I sure as fuck did, and there’s more where that came from.” He grabbed her hips and thrust his cock into her, causing her to almost buckle from the sensation.

“Holy shit, Al,” she breathed.

“We belong together, and I don’t like seeing you with another man.” He slammed into her, moving one hand to rub her clit.

“I don’t like seeing you with other women.” Her eyes rolled back. He’d gotten her so riled up, she was already climaxing.

“It’s not the same thing,” he grunted, moving faster as he chased his high.

“It’s worse,” she whispered, her body shaking through her orgasm.

“I don’t care.” His body jerked as his cum spilled inside her. He rested his hand against her back, snuggling his face in her hair. “And now you’re gonna go back to your date, filled to the brim, hoping that little scrap of lace will keep my cum from

dripping down your leg.”

“Don’t be gross.” If gross meant hot as fuck possessive caveman.

He slid out of her and stood back, and the loss of his closeness instantly brought reality back in. They were in a janitor’s closet. She grabbed a roll of toilet paper from the shelf and ripped off a long strand. Wiping between her legs, she shook her head. “This was a mistake.”

He dragged his hands over his face. “Don’t say that. I can quit. Ben has the transfer. He’s safe again. That’s the main thing. We can find another show to pay for the other shit.”

Jeannie shook her head. “Not likely, especially once it gets out that you bailed on this one.”

Al scowled. “I’m sick of this whole thing. I need—” He sighed, looking up. “Fuck, Jeannie. We can’t have this conversation in a closet. Let’s go to the bar.” He opened the door and stepped into the hallway, but before Jeannie could follow, he slammed the door shut.

“Shane!” he said, a little too loudly. “What are you doing here in the hallway? And you’re with Diane. Who has a camera!”

Crap. Jeannie bit her lip. She’d been gone too long, and now somehow Shane had been wrangled into shooting some footage. If she and Al were caught together, Al would lose his contract and have to pay a penalty and they’d be in worse shape than when they’d started.

“I was looking for some towels. You know that Mercedes; she’s a ton of fun but makes a bit of a mess. I couldn’t get the front desk to answer, so I came to look for

myself.” He paused for a few moments while Diane said something about Lindsey being impressed with last night’s b-roll footage, so now she was stuck hanging out for a second night.

Jeannie’s stomach soured at the reminder that Al had been here last night with another woman.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Oh, uh, there weren’t any towels in there. I guess they are being washed. You know, I sure could use a drink. How about we film a scene at the bar? I bet the fans will love a nightcap with the host.”

She waited until their footsteps died off and then another few minutes to be safe. She looked at her watch and swore. It had been fifteen minutes since she’d left Shane to pee. Maybe she could text him and claim food poisoning. She’d heard a few whispers that the hotel food had made some people sick.

As she crept through the lobby, she locked eyes with Al at the bar. He was sitting next to Shane, with Diane standing nearby filming. With a slight nod of his head, he acknowledged her. Any more and he’d give her away, but God, how she wished things could be simpler. She’d just had the hottest sex of her life while on a date with another man. And now she was slinking away like a teenager on prom night. Maybe she was more like her mother than she wanted to admit.

Chapter 32

“Ladies, we’re down to the final three. For two of you, the evidence of attraction is piling up. But for one of you, well, in a few minutes you’ll be free to go. Al, when you’re ready, please submit your findings.”

Al held back a groan as Shane walked out of the scene. The tool was so over the top it was ridiculous. But so was the show, so it fit. In fact, the only thing that didn’t fit about the show was him. He stepped forward, ready to get the arraignment over. Did it even matter who he sent home at this point? The person he really wanted wasn’t an option.

“Iona, please step forward.” Al picked up an evidence card and stared at it dramatically. Marina had told him that was important. He knew exactly who was going home tonight, but she stressed he needed to appear to be struggling.

“I never could have imagined our date would end the way it did, with a fire alarm and a hotel evacuation.”

“Got that right,” she muttered.

“But even though we lost that time together, it helped me realize I do want more time with you.” He held out the evidence card. “Iona, will you accept this evidence of attraction?”

Iona’s scowl vanished and she smiled bright enough to light up the room. She plucked the card out of his hand and reached her arms around his neck. “Any time you want to reschedule, you let me know,” she purred next to his ear. Her lips kissed just under his earlobe, nipping him slightly. “I’ll provide you with so much evidence, you won’t know what to do with yourself.”

Al cleared his throat, then reached up to pull her hands from his neck. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He fought the urge to wipe his neck clean. Iona was pure sex appeal, and by all rights, he should be sporting at least a semi. But alas, Al Junior’s eye was only focused on one woman.

“Mercedes, please step forward.” Her hair was piled high in a messy bun, and she wore a dark green tracksuit, partially unzipped to show her signature cleavage. She took off her sunglasses and set them in the space between her breasts. After the show, she should write a book. *A Hundred and One Ways to Use Your Cleavage (Besides Turning Men into Zombies)*. It could work.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I got rode hard and put away wet, ehmuchacho?”

The fuck?

“Uh, Mercedes, you were pretty drunk last night, so maybe you’re confused. But I can assure you, we did nothing even close to that.” His eyes searched the crew, scanning until he found Jeannie. She was looking straight ahead, purposely avoiding his gaze and her eyes were like tiny slits. Surely, she didn’t believe that he slept with Mercedes, then came downstairs and slept with her?

Mercedes cocked her head to the side and shrugged. “You asked, I answered.” She crossed her arms and pursed her lips, daring him to say anything else.

He wasn’t sure what to make of her attitude, but he didn’t really care either. If she was going to lie about their time together, she definitely needed to go. “I think we’re in different places with our lives right now. You are vibrant with such a zest for life, I’m not sure I could keep up. In fact, I’d probably hold you down. I wish you the best in life, but for now, there’s no evidence of attraction.”

“No jodas, idiota.”

The poor girl. She’d lost her capacity for speech. Hopefully she’d be okay in a few days.

“But come here anyway,” she said, throwing her arms around him in a big hug. “I had a great time, and next time you come to San Antonio, look me up and we’ll drink ourway down the Riverwalk.” She stepped back and waved to the girls. “Adios, putas!”

Iona rolled her eyes, but Jazz laughed. “Later, Mercedes! Safe travels.”

Al's shoulders sagged. Almost done.

"Jazz, will you step forward, please?"

She walked in front of him, smiling sweetly.

"Our date was also cut short, but I do hope that won't turn you off to North Carolina seafood. I'm sure we didn't get the fish on ice soon enough."

"Oh yeah, no worries. Shit happens, right?" she said, and Diane laughed out loud from behind her camera, earning her a loud shush from Lindsey.

"I'm glad you can laugh about it. That's one thing I enjoy about you—your ability to roll with the punches." He reached over to pick up the evidence card. "Jazz, will you accept this evidence of attraction, and go with me on one more date?"

"Of course." She took the card and gave him a brief hug before clipping it to her necklace.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Jazz returned to her place next to Iona, and Shane walked back into the scene.

“And then there were two!” he announced, as if it wasn’t obvious to everyone over the age of four how many women were left.

“Ladies, for our final dates, we have a little surprise. As much as we love it here in Grimm County, we’ve exhausted all the dating possibilities.”

“Hey now,” Al began. Who was this city slicker to come in here and knock his town? It didn’t matter that what he said was true.

“For our final round of dates, you’ll need to pack your bags because we are headed to—” he paused, and Al swore he saw him counting to five on his fingers — “New York City!”

The girls cheered and clapped as expected, and Al did his best to look enthused. He’d never been to New York City, so this would be fun. He looked from Iona to Jazz and sighed. So. Much. Fun.

Chapter 33

“We’re in the home stretch. The green mile. The final meal.” Shane lowered his voice as he smoldered at the camera. He stood in front of a giant fountain in Central Park, creating a backdrop that would be perfect for the promos. “Tonight, you will each have a romantic adventure with Al. This will be your last opportunity to talk with him, so make sure you put it all on the line. Leave no feeling left unsaid. The next time you see him, one of you will get a proposal, and the other, well,”—he frowned

and shook his head— “her case for Al’s affection will be dismissed.”

Al bit the inside of his cheek. Twenty-four, maybe thirty-six more hours and they’d be done. He was surprised by how much he’d disliked filming, given that he was the only deputy that enjoyed shooting Grimm County Lawmen.

“Iona, you’re up first. Jazz, you can wait over there.” Shane guided Jazz to a park bench to wait for her turn.

“I hope he won’t be too worn out for you.” Iona smirked as she grabbed Al’s hand. She wore a sleek black dress, going all the way to her ankles but with a slit bordering on indecent. She placed her hand on his chest and leaned in close. “I hope our date involves private time. I still haven’t been able to show you my best moves.” She lifted his hand to her lips and slipped his index finger into her mouth, moaning loudly.

“Uh, well, anyway.” Al cleared his throat and stepped back, pulling his hand out of her mouth. Was she for real? There was no way she got off by sucking on his finger. Although, those nachos he’d had for lunch had been pretty good. Since Marina used to live here, she’d told him where to find the best ones. They’d been made with beef cheeks, which Al had never tried before but holy hell, he would have to figure out a way to get that when he was back home. And the cheese was so melty, like—

The clip-clop of a horses’ hooves reminded Al that he was on a date with Iona. Not nachos.

“Our romance has been like a fairy tale, so I thought it was only appropriate that we finish with a horse-drawn carriage ride.” The driver pulled the reins to stop the horses, then hopped down and opened the door to the white open-air buggy.

Iona’s lip curled. “How romantic,” she bit out.

Al fought back a grin. “Something wrong?” Yeah, he figured Iona was more of a Ferrari kind of girl.

“No, of course not.” A wicked smile crossed her lips. “I can be creative.”

Jeannie bounced her leg as she waited on the bench next to Jazz. Her eyes drifted to her watch as she tried to sneak another peek. Forty-five minutes had passed since the happy fairy-tale couple disappeared into the park. They couldn’t be much longer. Surely there were horse labor laws or something.

“Hot date tonight?” Jazz asked.

Jeannie jolted up, blinking. “What?”

Jazz nodded toward her wrist. “You keep checking the time. I thought you might be worried about missing a hot date.”

“Oh! No.” She smoothed her hands along her leg, trying to calm her nerves. “No date at all,” she mumbled, “hot or otherwise.”

“Are you sure?” Jazz asked, surprise clear on her face. She lowered her voice and scooted closer. “I thought you and Shane were ...”

“Nah,” Jeannie shook her head. “We didn’t make it past flirting. There was one date, but we didn’t click.” Jeannie sucked in a breath, remembering the date that ended with her getting railed by Al in the supply closet.

“No happy ending to the date? That’s a shame.”

“Not with him.” Jeannie started off in the direction where the carriage should return. Seriously, the horse was probably half dead. The production company was going to get fined for animal cruelty.

“Oh well, plenty of fish in the sea. Listen, I’ve been wanting to ask you, what’s it like living in Grimm County?”

Jeannie turned sharply. “It’s, um, okay.” The bouncing in her leg was back.

Jazz twisted her hands in her lap. “Just okay?”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Shit. She was a better person than this. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “If you don’t mind everybody knowing your business and driving thirty minutes to get to the mall, then it’s wonderful. Like anywhere, there are certain areas you want to avoid, but most of the people are great and tourism season keeps things from getting too boring.”

Jazz smiled. “Well, that’s great. Really great.”

Jeannie plastered on a fake smile. “Why, Jazz, are you thinking of moving to our sweet little town?”

“Maybe a little. My family is out in California. I moved to Virginia for law school and stayed after I graduated. All I have there is work, and lately, I haven’t even enjoyed that. It would be silly to stay there if my heart is in Grimm.”

A dagger sliced through Jeannie’s heart. Fuck. Like, fuckity fuck fuck. This woman had real feelings. Of course she did. Who wouldn’t love Al? “I’d be happy to show you around and introduce you to some people.”

“That would be great, thanks. Can I ask another favor?”

“Sure.” What had Jeannie done in a past life to deserve this torture?

“You’ve known Al a long time, right?”

“Yeah, since we were kids. Why? You want to see his embarrassing middle school pics?” Jeannie reached for her phone.

Jazz shook her head. “No, well, actually yeah, but maybe later. I wanted to know from someone who knows him if he’s really here to find love. Why did he resort to a reality dating show to find a partner?”

“Ahhh.” Jeannie bit her lip. “I get it. You’re wondering why this sexy, sweet, amazing, funny, hardworking, compassionate, loyal, man in uniform is still single? Does he have an extra nipple? Eat garlic for breakfast? Sacrifice puppies?”

Jazz chuckled. “Something like that.”

“Well, our town is small. And the women there often don’t see past his good looks or that pussy-getter uniform. Same with the tourists that come to town in the summer. They want their night with the deputy they’ve watched on TV, but they don’t want the real Al. The one who calls me every night to make sure I got home okay. The one who goes with me every month to visit my brother in prison. The one who hosts poker night with the grandpas at the nursing home. Maybe he’s been waiting for someone to see the real him.”

Jazz nodded. “I see.” She stared at Jeannie, then turned away. “Speak of the devil, I think I hear the horse.”

Sure enough, the horse and carriage rounded the corner, finally bringing the date with Iona to an end. As soon as the carriage stopped, Al leaped to the ground, his dress shirt untucked and his hair sticking up in different directions. “Thanks, Iona,” he shouted as he sprinted toward his trailer.

“I guess he’s going to get changed for your date?” Jeannie said to Jazz with a shrug.

Iona stepped down from the carriage, wiping the sides of her mouth with a smirk.

“Have fun, Jazz.” The sound of the trailer door slamming shut echoed across the

park. Iona laughed. “He may be a few minutes,” she said with a wink as she sauntered toward the car that would take her back to the hotel.

Jazz bit her bottom lip. “Uh, you don’t think they, uh ...”

Jeannie shrugged, her heart dropping in her chest. “I don’t know,” she answered honestly. She’d purposely avoided him since he’d stepped out of that closet. Part of her was afraid of what they might do if they were in the same room again, and that would jeopardize his place on the show. But another part of her, a much bigger part, was afraid that they wouldn’t do anything. That they’d go back to just friends again. Maybe Mercedes had been telling the truth, and Jeannie was another notch as he worked his way through cast and crew.

“Jazz, I need you over here! There’s some paperwork you’ll need to fill out before your date,” Lindsey shouted from across the park.

“Thanks for the chat,” she said as she made her way to the director’s table.

Jeannie tugged at her ponytail, twirling the strands in her fingers. Jazz really liked Al, and Al seemed to like her. He also liked Iona, enough that he couldn’t stop himself from doing something with her on a carriage ride through Central Park. Fortunately, before that image lodged itself into her mind, her phone buzzed.

“Hello, this is Jeannie.”

“Jeannie, darling. It’s Victor. A little birdie told me that filming is almost wrapped up. I know you weren’t planning to leave town without at least giving me a chance to show you how well you’d fit into our company.”

“Oh, well—”

“Jeannie,” he warned, “I’m not used to being turned down. What’s wrong? Was our offer not high enough?”

“No, sir. It was extremely generous.”

It was more than generous. They’d offered her a salary that was three times what she’d made last year, with a commission from her clients on top of that. Then there was the health insurance, a 401K, and an apartment for the first year. For once in her life, she wouldn’t have to hustle. Wouldn’t have to stress about where the next gig would come from. Victor’s company would take care of everything.

“Then what’s the problem? Is there something else keeping you in that little town? Your clients, perhaps?”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Jeannie sighed. If only. The only clients she had left were Marina, Rose, and Al. Just one more thing on top of everything else. She almost wondered if Lilith's curse had landed on her. After she'd gotten her tire fixed, the alternator broke. Then the pipe burst under her sink, flooding the kitchen while she'd been at the grocery store.

She scanned the set, her eyes stopping when they found Al. He'd changed into a pair of khakis and a polo shirt. He stalked across the courtyard to Jazz, reaching for her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. Jazz shook her head and said something she couldn't hear. Al raised his palms and answered her back. They both laughed and Diane stood there with her camera, capturing the entire, adorable exchange.

"Actually, no. There's nothing keeping me there. I'll come by tomorrow."

Chapter 34

"What happened on that carriage ride? Based on what I saw, I'm not sure I want your hands anywhere near me," Jazz asked, yanking her hand from Al's.

He stood back, holding his palms up. "Whatever you think happened, I promise you're wrong. Back me up, Diane."

Diane snickered. "Sorry, lover boy. I'm not allowed to interfere. I'm the impartial camerawoman. I see, speak, and hear no evil. I just film it."

"And what kind of evils did she film, Al?" Jazz's eyes narrowed.

Al grinned. "The kind that involves a horse taking a massive shit every three

minutes.”

Jazz’s mouth dropped. “What?”

He nodded. “You heard me. And it turns out Iona isn’t much of a nature chick, so she threw up. Several times.”

Jazz turned toward Diane. “And you got all that on tape?”

“Sure did,” Diane answered.

“As soon as we were done, I bolted out of there. I couldn’t risk her throwing up on me. Plus the smell was, yech.” He shivered.

Jazz laughed again. “How romantic.”

Diane lowered her camera and stepped back. “I’ve got to rig up the camera for your date, but that was great. America will love your banter.”

Al glanced at the palm of his hand, then back up at Jazz. “You’re looking very fetching this evening.”

“Fetching?” Jazz laughed.

“What can I say,” Al said with a wink. “You’re the kind of girl that makes a guy want to expand his vocabulary.”

Jazz laughed again. “Oh my. You certainly have all the lines down.”

He glanced down again, squinting before looking back up. “I’m glad we’re getting to have the date together. After tonight, I’ll forever think of you when I see a sunset.”

“Damn, that is really ...” Jazz paused. “Hey, what’s on your hand?”

His head jerked up. “What? Nothing.” He should have known he couldn’t pull this off. Christian had made it look so easy, and it was so much better than memorizing lines.

“Let me see.”

“No.” He shoved his hand in his pocket. “Where’s Lindsey? We need to get going.”

“Show me your hand, Al.”

He sighed and pulled out his hand, turning his palm to show her the notes he’d written.

She burst into laughter. “You have a cheat sheet?”

“Uh, maybe?” Laughter was good. If she was laughing, she wasn’t yelling.

“But why?”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Before the show, I sat down with a friend who is obsessed with reality dating shows. Well, all shows really, but I asked her to tell me what I should say to win over the ladies. She gave me some key lines and I didn’t want to mess them up, so I wrote them down.”

“Al, you know you’re handsome, fun, and a real catch, right?”

Al grinned. This was going way better than he expected.

“So, were you trying to win over the ladies, or the audience at home?”

The grin slid off his face. “Say what now?”

“These lines, if they aren’t coming from your heart, then whoever you win over isn’t falling for the real you. I’m wondering if you’re really here for the right reasons.”

“Uh ...” Jeez, no wonder the prison systems were overflowing when there were prosecutors like this. He was ready to admit to everything.

“What are you doing here, Al? Do you even want to find love? Or do you want more screen time?”

“I’m trying to be the man that you all want me to be.”

“And who do you think I want you to be?”

“The handsome reality star sheriff’s deputy who always says and does the right

thing?”

“Sure, that sounds like a nice guy. But is that who you are? Do you even know? Or is that just a person you’ve developed to meet everyone else’s expectations?”

Al scratched his jaw. “I don’t even know anymore.”

Jazz nodded. “I see. When’s the last time you went on a vacation?”

“Last year. Jeannie and I went to the Outer Banks. I had to do a bunch of promos for a tourism company while I was there, but it was free so that was cool.”

“If you worked, it doesn’t count. When is the last time you went somewhere because that’s where you wanted to go? And you didn’t work, didn’t try to make it into anything more than a couple days to relax and have fun?”

Al thought for a minute. “Well, um, never, I guess.”

Jazz laughed. “You know, we may be more alike than I realized. This is my first vacation in years, and it’s not even a vacation. If you could go anywhere, where would you go and what would you do?”

Al thought for a minute. “Well, Jeannie and I always talked about going on a cruise.”

“Interesting,” Jazz said, a sly grin on her face. “That’s your ideal vacation? A cruise with Jeannie?”

Al nodded, smiling. “Yeah. To get on a giant boat and eat, drink, and dance our way across the Atlantic. I would really enjoy that.”

“Jazz!” Lindsey shouted, walking up to them. “Why haven’t you signed the waiver?”

We need to start filming.”

She turned to Lindsey. “Yeah, I’m not signing that.”

“You have to. Our risk department won’t let you go parasailing without signing the waiver. Al’s already signed his.”

“Did you even read it?” Jazz asked him.

Al shrugged. He’d signed something earlier, not too sure what it was for though.

“Well, I did. And look, I understand they aren’t responsible for a flock of birds getting tangled up in the ropes, causing us to plummet to our deaths. However, I refuse to waive my right to sue if our deaths are due to negligence, misconduct, or an intoxicated staff member.”

Al’s eyes widened. “It said all that?”

Jazz shrugged. “Pretty much.”

“Are you serious?” Lindsey asked, her face paling. “There’s no backup plan.”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“We can sit on the bench and talk,” Al offered, trying to hide his disappointment. He’d never been parasailing and had been excited to try it.

“What about a body double?” Diane asked.

Lindsey’s head snapped. “A what?”

“A body double. If this was a regular tv show, they’d do that for an actor, so we should be able to do the same for Jazz.”

Jazz gave Diane a wide smile.

“They were going to wear helmets anyway, so that makes it even better. The way the camera is rigged, the footage will be rocky. It shouldn’t be too much trouble for a special effects team to swap out Jazz’s face.”

Lindsey’s eyes narrowed as she thought. “Brilliant!” she shouted. “Diane, you have a knack for this.” She called over to Jeannie. “Come over here and sign this paper.”

“Good luck!” Jazz cackled as Jeannie walked away.

“Thanks for doing this.” Al grinned at Jeannie as he placed the helmet on her head. He took his time buckling the chin strap, allowing his fingers to brush along her cheeks. Her eyes flared, and he knew she was as affected by their closeness as he was. “For a second there, I thought I’d have to go on another carriage ride and trust

me when I say once was enough.”

Jeannie rolled her eyes, pulling away from his hands. “Surely the great and powerful Al has more stamina than that?”

Al chuckled. “Just wait until you see the footage. Then you’ll understand.”

“That’s a hard pass. I’ve seen enough already.”

Al shrugged. “Suit yourself. It’s good stuff though. Oh look! The boat is about to take off.”

Jeannie took a deep breath and nodded. “The things I do for my friends.”

“You’re the best, Jeannie-girl.”

The engine roared and the boat moved across the harbor, picking up speed as they moved away from the shore.

“Al!” Jeannie screamed as their parachute caught wind and slowly rose in the sky. “I changed my mind! Tell them to stop!”

“No way! This is amazing!”

“I’m too young to die!” she wailed, slamming her eyes shut.

Al laughed. “You will not die.” After a minute, the rope grew taut, and they maintained their height in the air. “Now open your eyes.”

“I can’t! Just tell me when it’s over. I don’t have to look. They’re going to put Jazz’s face over mine.”

“Nope. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Open your eyes and look.”

“It’s fine. I’m good.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes. More than anybody.”

“Then open your eyes. I promise you’ve never seen anything like this. It’s like a whole new world up here.”

Jeannie opened one eye, then gasped and opened the other. “Oh my God! Al! This is amazing! Like really fucking amazing! Look at those city lights, they’re like diamonds.”

The boat traveled down the harbor as they admired the cityscape, pointing out various landmarks as they passed.

“It’s so peaceful up here,” Al said. “No expectations. No one to tell us what we should or shouldn’t do.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” she said, sighing. “Hey, if I fell out of this thing, do you think I’d look like a shooting star?”

“What the fuck, Jeannie? Don’t jinx us.”

As beautiful as the view of the city was, Al couldn’t help but stare at the even more beautiful woman next to him. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright with wonder. It had been a long time since he’d seen her smile so brightly.

Eventually their magical ride in the air came to an end, and they were slowly lowered back down to the boat. The landing was a little wobbly, and he took full advantage of holding on to Jeannie as they steadied themselves.

He stared into her eyes as he unbuckled her helmet. His hand smoothed through her tangled hair. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but I’m glad Jazz backed out. That was the most amazing experience I’ve ever had, and I’m glad I got to share it with you.”

“And that’s a wrap!” Lindsey shouted as the boat landed at the dock. “Great work tonight. Everybody can pack up and we’ll see you tomorrow night for the finale.”

“Jeannie, thanks for filling in,” Jazz said.

“It was my pleasure.” Jeannie smiled.

Jazz nodded, pausing before she walked toward the car. “I guess I’ll see you

tomorrow?”

“Actually, I don’t think I’ll make the finale.” Jeannie looked away as she stepped out of the harness.

“What?” Al asked, shock coursing through his system. “What do you mean you won’t make it? I can’t film the finale without you.”

Jeannie rolled her eyes. “Of course you can. It’s not like I’m the director.” She looked around the crew. “Or even one of the camera people.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you seriously skipping it? What could be more important?”

Jeannie sighed. “I didn’t want to say anything, but it’s a job interview. A record label in the city offered me a marketing position. It’s a great opportunity, so I’m going to check it out.”

His eyes narrowed. “Is it one of those remote jobs?”

“Um, no, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?” Al shook his head. “Are you leaving me?” What was she thinking? He’d done what she asked. How could she leave him now?

“No. Of course not. I mean, not yet anyway.” She shrugged her shoulders and looked up at the sky. “Like I said, it’s just an interview. And come on, Al, you might be engaged tomorrow. You’ll be so busy with your new fiancée you won’t even notice I’m gone.”

Al dropped his arms and looked down at his feet. “But I need you. You’re my ...” He

looked around, struggling for the words.

“Your what, Al?” she asked quietly.

My world. My heart. “My friend. My publicist. My neighbor.” God, what did she want to hear? “I need you.”

Jeannie shook her head. “No, you don’t. You’ve got multiple endorsement deals. You’re on two television shows and the star of one of them. In a few days, you’ll have enough money for Ben’s attorney.”

Al blinked and ran a hand through his hair. “I couldn’t have done any of that without you.”

Jeannie smiled. “You are right about that. But we did what we set out to do. All your wishes have come true. And now it’s time for me to move on.”

“Move on? But you can’t.” His heart cracked. “I still need you.”

“To be your publicist?”

Al ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah. I mean, no.” Fuck, this was all going so wrong. But she’d made it clear that she didn’t want any declarations of love from him. He had no idea what to say anymore.

Jeannie stepped back, blinking quickly. “Well, that’s too bad. You don’t get to keep me. I want to see what else the world has to offer. I’ve been cooped up in that town for too long.”

Al wanted to get on his hands and knees and beg her to stay, but she was right. She deserved the world, and he’d be a selfish bastard to keep her from that. But did it

have to be tomorrow?

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Are you sure the company is legit? Who has interviews at night?”

She shrugged. “I’m going on a tour and meeting with the owner, Victor Crawford. He said he spends most of the day in the studio with musicians, so the only time he can meet is later in the evening. This is New York City, not po-dunk Grimm County. That’s how successful people do things.”

“So you would really leave me like that? You’re going to abandon me? Leave me to do it alone? Like Ginger?” He didn’t give a shit about her skipping out on the final arraignment. Hell, he’d skip it too if he could. But leaving Grimm without him? Permanently?

Jeannie’s head reared back. “I know you did not compare me to your crackwhore of a mother.”

Al raised an eyebrow. It wasn’t an unfair comparison. He’d loved both women. And both women had left him.

“After everything I’ve done for you? After everything I’ve given ... You know what? Kiss my ass, Aloysius. You don’t have to worry about losing me to this other company, because I quit. You hear me? I quit. Not because I have another job offer. But because I. Quit. You.” She turned, her ponytail whipping in the wind.

Al buried his face in his hands. He fought the urge to call out to her, to beg her forgiveness, to beg her to stay. She told him from the beginning that she didn’t want more from him, and he had to accept that. Besides, there were two women fighting for him right now, both eager to get a proposal and spend their lives with him. He’d be

damned if he spent another second chasing after someone who didn't want him.

He slowly lowered his hands, ready to find his ride and get out of there. As he looked up, he found the shocked face of Diane, standing there with her camera. She'd recorded everything. Of course she had.

Chapter 35

A black SUV with the letters NYPD splayed across the side pulled up to the set. Al watched as a uniformed officer stepped out of the driver's side and opened the back door. Iona stepped out, looking elegant in a silver sequined dress, like she was ready for the front page of a magazine.

This was it, the final elimination. He'd been unsure of a lot of things with this dating show fiasco, but of this choice, he was certain. Iona was a sexy, confident, strong woman, but there was something about her he couldn't get past. It was one thing to be snarky. He liked snarky. Jeannie was snarky and he loved that about her. Liked that about her. But Jeannie's snark came with rolled eyes and a playful grin. Iona was just mean.

She stood in front of him, and he reached out to hold both of her hands in his. "Iona, I feel privileged to have gotten to know you over the last few weeks. I don't think our paths would have crossed otherwise, and I'll be forever grateful to this show for introducing us." All lies, big fat lies. He'd gone back to memorizing them though, after being caught reading them by Jazz. At this rate, he was going to owe Marina a month of free drinks.

Iona smiled, her teeth bright enough to rival Shane's. Shit. She must think she's going to be picked. Things were about to get awkward.

"However," he began, and her smile faded, "I have stronger feelings for someone

else. While there was a lot of evidence of our attraction, there wasn't enough for me to move forward. Our case for love has been dismissed."

Iona jerked her hands from his and stared at him in silence.

Al looked around, hoping one of the crew members would step in. Lindsey looked almost gleeful, rubbing her hands together as she stared at the video feed on her laptop.

"Um, so I guess this is goodbye."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," she finally said, hands on her hips.

"Oh. Um, no, I'm serious."

"You're picking that mousy, cheap lawyer over all this?" She waved a hand over her body.

"This is about you and me." Al tried to deflect her anger.

"You and me? Since when has it been about you and me?" She motioned to the crew surrounding them. "It's been you, me, and the twenty cast and crew of this bullshit TV show." She shook her head. "You're going to be sorry."

"Oh, I think I'll be—"

"I have a mouth like a fucking hoover."

Al's eyes widened.

"If you'd have just let me show you, but now you'll never know. And trust me, that

homey bitch doesn't have the skills I have. Fuck it. I'm glad you didn't pick me. You are a fucking joke. A goddamn himbo. You say you're a deputy, but what kind of cop models underwear and posts selfies all day? You're fake, the show is fake, and I bet that bulge in your pants is fake."

She flipped her hair and stalked back to the SUV. Al blinked, shaking his head. As far as breakups went, that was probably the worst. Worse even than Betty Silverstone. He chuckled, remembering how she'd egged his side of the duplex and painted dicks all over his car.

He turned to find Jeannie, so they could reminisce, only to remember she was gone. She was at that interview for a new job away from Grimm County, away from him. His heart clenched and he took a deep breath. Would he ever stop seeking her out to share life's moments?

"Marina, I need some advice." Al turned away from the cameras for privacy. It was ten o'clock at night. There'd been a massive fire a few blocks over that had delayed filming by hours. All the sirens and low-flying news helicopters were incompatible with an intimate garden setting, according to Lindsey.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Al? What’s wrong?” Marina’s voice called from the phone.

He rubbed a hand over his face, pacing across the gravel in front of the archway. “The bachelor on these shows,” he cleared his throat, looking around before lowering his voice, “does he have to choose somebody?”

“Al! Are you freaking kidding me? Did you send someone home too soon and want to bring her back? I love it when that happens!”

“Uh, not exactly. Look, I don’t have much time.”

“Right! Okay, it’s rare, but no, he does not have to choose someone. It’s risky though, because the fans might feel like they wasted their time if there’s no happy ending. They could turn on you and sympathize with the ladies for being led on. Most likely you’ll emerge as the villain instead of that red head. Depending on how bad it is, you can probably kiss Dancing with the Stars goodbye.”

Al nodded, thinking it over. He didn’t remember his contract saying he had to propose to anyone. He’d still get paid but might not get any future deals out of it. Which was fine. He would love to go home and not worry about posting pictures and repping products for once.

“Thanks, Marina.”

“At the end of the day, you’ve got to do what’s right for you, Al. That’s the number one thing. The more genuine the bachelor, the more the audience likes him, whatever he decides. Now I’m glad you called. Jeannie had promised to Facetime the finale,

and clearly, it's going to be a finale for the ages! Can you pass the phone over to her?"

Lindsey's whistle cut through the air. "Okay, people! Jazz is on her way! I need everyone in place in two minutes. Make sure the ring is nearby!"

A soft sheen of sweat dampened his forehead.

"Hellllo! You still there?" Marina's voice came through the phone.

"Oh, right, sorry. I've got to go in a minute." He tried to remember where the conversation had left off. "Jeannie's not here. I guess she's been thinking about joining a big marketing firm, or company, or something." Al rubbed his hand over his face. "Some guy offered her a job, so she went to have an interview."

"This late at night?" Marina snorted.

"I mean, it's the city that never sleeps, right?"

"I guess," Marina hedged.

"I pointed that out to Jeannie as well, but apparently, he also does music or recording or something, so he has to be in the studio during the day. He could only see her at night."

"A record producer? Who wants to meet her late at night?" She went silent for a few beats. "Did she tell you his name?"

Alarm bells rang in Al's head. "What's going on, Marina?"

"His name. What is his name?"

Al racked his mind to think, but he'd been so pissed when she'd told him that most of the conversation was a blur. "It was, um, something, like, uh, Vance? And something about food. Crawfish maybe?"

"Vance Crawfish? Crap, Al. Do you mean Victor Crawford?"

"Yes! That was it. Do you know him or something?"

"Al, listen to me now and listen to me good. That man is a horrible, disgusting pig. My dad—you remember him, right?"

Al paled as he considered the implications that Jeannie was meeting a man with connections to Marina's mafia father.

"My dad tried to sell me to Victor. He told me I was getting a record deal. I thought I was going to sing and make music and maybe go on a tour. But when we met with Victor, he made it clear those weren't the only things he expected of me."

"You mean like—"

"Sex? Yeah, and my lack of enthusiasm would not have been an issue for him."

"Al! Jazz is arriving now. You have to get in place." Lindsey was clearly pissed, but he couldn't bother with her now. She could wait. They all could wait. In fact, they could all shove this damn show up their—

"Al," Christian's voice came over the phone. "You still with us?"

"Yeah, but, um, fuck." His heart pounded in his chest. Jeannie had been gone for hours. That Victor asshole could be doing all manner of horrible things to her, and the last thing he'd said to her was—

Page 55

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Al!” Christian barked. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop. Spiraling won’t help Jeannie now. Do y’all still have that GPS app on your phones?”

“Yes.” The pressure on his chest lifted slightly, remembering that he had a way to find her.

“Go hail a cab and get to her. Now. This guy is a real piece of work. I’ve been looking into him for a few months.”

“Aww, really? That’s so sweet.”

“Focus, Marina. Anyway, there have been rumors circulating about him for years, but no one has formally pressed charges. Just get to her as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll let you know when I have her.”

Al ended the call and pulled open the app they used for emergencies.

“Al, did I hear that right? Jeannie’s in trouble with some creepy asshole?” Diane asked. Where had she come from?

He glared at the camera on her shoulder, and she rolled her eyes, whispering, “I’m buying you time, dumbass. As long as Lindsey thinks you’re over here having an emotional breakdown, she’ll stop yelling for you to get on with the show.”

Al nodded. “Sorry, thank you. Fuck. I have to go.”

“What about the show?”

“I don’t care about this show!” Al loosened his bowtie and walked away from the garden.

“And the money for Jeannie’s brother?” Diane hissed, still carrying the camera on her shoulder as she jogged next to him.

Al stopped suddenly and glared at Diane.

“What? I heard you guys arguing.”

He looked around the set, at the dozen crew members set up to tape his maybe proposal. The NYPD SUV sat on the street with Jazz, beautiful as ever, sitting in the back seat.

Diane had a point. If he left now, he’d be giving everything up. It was one thing to end the series still single. But running off in the middle of the finale? Could they even air the series at that point? He’d be violating half a dozen clauses in his contract which meant he wouldn’t get paid and would definitely be fined. Without the money, Ben would continue to rot in jail. But Jeannie was in danger, and none of that mattered. He would kick his own ass if he left her to that fate. Ben would happily stay in jail to protect her.

He tossed the final evidence card to the side and walked off set.

“Al, wait!” Diane called out, eyes darting around before landing on the SUV. “I’ve got an idea!”

Chapter 36

“I’m here to see Mr. Crawford, please.” The security officer held up a finger and picked up the phone, presumably to check her story. Jeannie scanned the lobby, taking in the marbled floors and crystal chandeliers.

So far, she was impressed with Vizier Records and couldn’t believe they were interested in hiring her. She’d spent the last few hours with an HR rep, touring the offices and interviewing with several teams. The Wonder Tower had over fifty floors and many of the executives had apartments there. This company clearly had money. No wonder the salary they were offering was so high.

“You’ve been cleared. Follow the hallway all the way to the end and you’ll see the restaurant on the left.”

“Okay, thanks.” She hadn’t expected a meal, especially this late, but that was fine. She loved free food. Mr. Crawford had said he was working late, hence the reason for such a late interview. He probably hadn’t eaten yet. Judging by the looks of the place so far, the food would probably be delicious and fancy.

She smiled at the turn in her luck as she walked down the hallway. Even if she didn’t take the job, she’d have a fun experience to share with the girls back home.

She came to the end of the hallway and turned to find a swanky looking restaurant, the decor matching the rest of the building. The hostess greeted her as she stepped forward.

“Ms. Knight?”

“Yes.”

“Your table is ready, but I’ll need your phone.”

“My phone?” Jeannie asked.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

The hostess made a tight smile. “Because of the nature of the business that is often conducted here, we must maintain the strictest level of privacy for our customers.”

“Seriously?”

The hostess held out a box, similar to a safe deposit box at the bank. Not that she’d ever used one, but she’d seen enough on TV. Jeannie set her phone inside and closed the lid.

“It’ll be waiting for you when you leave. Follow me.” The hostess guided Jeannie to an empty table by the window. They passed the bar as they walked, and Jeannie didn’t miss the leer she received from the sleazy bartender. She rolled her eyes. Men were the same everywhere.

Jeannie scanned the room, noticing that all the tables were empty, which seemed a little odd. Maybe the food was terrible. She sighed. This had to be karma for telling Shane she’d had food poisoning. Now she would get it for real.

“Mr. Crawford had an urgent matter come up, but he will be here shortly. He said to start you with this.” The hostess motioned toward a bottle of Dom Perignon.

“Oh, hell yeah,” Jeannie said, laughing. “I’ll wait as long as I need to. But do you think I could get some bread sticks or something?” She’d had dinner ages ago, so she needed something in her stomach to keep from getting drunk. That wasn’t the best look for a job interview.

“Of course.” The hostess turned and walked away.

Jeannie took a sip of the champagne. That was way better than the twelve-dollar bottle she usually bought from the grocery store. As she stared at the bustling city life below, she was reminded of parasailing with Al. Was he engaged yet? She checked her watch. Probably already celebrating.

She slapped a palm across her forehead. Marina had asked her to Facetime the finale. She reached into her pocket and groaned. Right. Her phone was locked up with the hostess. What a stupid rule. Well, maybe it wasn't stupid, but it sure seemed stupid when she was the only one in the restaurant. Whose secrets was she going to blab? She sighed and poured herself another glass. Maybe she'd take the job so she could drink free champagne. As she downed the second glass, a pleasant buzz filled her body. Where were those breadsticks?

"Jeannie! It is so good to see you again." Victor's voice boomed through the empty restaurant.

About time he showed up. It was almost ten thirty, add that to the champagne and stress over Al, and she was ready to crawl into her hotel bed and call it a night. Only, she'd be crawling into that bed alone, and Al would be crawling into his with—

"I'm so sorry I'm late. My artist tonight was in the zone, and we never cut a session short when that happens."

"Oh, of course not. I completely understand." What she didn't understand was why this interview couldn't wait until tomorrow when the sun was shining.

"How's the champagne?"

"Delicious," she answered honestly. "But I am a little hungry." That hostess had

never brought her any bread. And she hadn't seen a waiter either, come to think of it. She would have loved to order an appetizer.

Victor waved a hand to the bartender. "Adam, make Jeannie a Victor special, please."

"Coming right up boss," the bartender said.

Victor turned back to Jeannie. "I created a special drink for my female clients. It's very sweet and fruity. You'll love it."

Jeannie scrunched her nose. Sexist, much? The last thing she needed was another drink, especially a misogynistic one, but damn, if she didn't love a fruity cocktail.

"I'm sure it'll be great. In fact, I'd love to take a picture. Oh wait, I don't have my phone," she teased. At least, she hoped it came across as teasing. Her resting bitch face probably said otherwise. She'd could have gotten through another five levels in Candy Crush while she was waiting for him.

"Now, now. That policy is there for a reason. Imagine what our rival firms would do if they saw a picture of us meeting with one of their clients?"

"Oh, right," Jeannie said. "I guess you aren't allowed to poach?"

Victor chuckled. "We most definitely are. It's how this industry works. But if they find out we are poaching before we ink a deal, they throw all kinds of cash and incentives, and we have to up our offer. You understand, I'm sure."

"Totally," Jeannie nodded, taking a sip of the Victor Special that the bartender had dropped off. She didn't understand, though. She'd never stolen a client or had one stolen from her. Or had she? Was that why so many clients had dropped her? Because someone else had poached them? Fire raged through her veins. She needed to get

back to Grimm and find out who was stealing her clients. Or maybe not. Maybe it was a sign.

“I spent the last couple of hours learning about Vizier Records. What would you like to know about me?” She was eager to get the interview rolling so she could leave.

Victor smiled. “Oh please, it’s been so long since we last met. Let’s enjoy ourselves before we get to business.” He nodded toward her drink. “Have some more.”

Something in his tone caused Jeannie to pause, and that was the final straw. She’d seen enough. The tour had been great, and it had been fun to imagine a different life for a few hours. But she wasn’t cut out for late night meetings and dinners without food. Or bosses with special drinks.

The drink was delicious, of course. But it was going straight to her head. In fact, damn. What had he put in this thing? Everclear? She blinked as her vision blurred.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Victor,” she slurred. “I’m so sorry, but I need to go.” She stood up quickly, feeling the room spin. Panic raced through her system as her thoughts immediately turned to Al. Something was wrong with her. Was she dying? Shit, she was dying, and she’d never be able to tell him how she really felt. Why hadn’t she told him? She could blame her brother’s situation, but that wasn’t the truth. The truth was she was scared. Scared of losing the most important person in her life. If she could get to him now, she would tell him. So what if he’d proposed? He could un-propose. That happened all the time. “I’m gonna need to reschedule,” she mumbled, struggling to form words. What the hell was in that drink?

“Oh no, darling.” His voice sounded far away. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Chapter 37

“You know I’m not a real cop, right? This is a prop car, and I put on this uniform so I could interview the girls on their way to the final arraignment,” Shane, who had apparently worn a cop costume to work, said after Al had climbed into the SUV and explained the situation to Jazz.

“Well, I am a real deputy, so we’re fine. Follow the GPS and keep your mouth shut.” Al took deep breaths as he turned to stare out of the back seat window, struggling to calm his mild hysteria as they traveled across the city.

“Not bad, Al,” Diane said from the front passenger seat, where she aimed her camera at the pair in the back. “We might actually pull this off.” She’d told Lindsey that Al was having second thoughts and needed to spend a little time with Jazz before proposing.

Jazz shook her head. “Have you called the actual NYPD? You may be a sheriff’s deputy, but you’re about six hundred miles out of your jurisdiction here. If anything is wrong—”

Al sucked in a deep breath.

“And I’m not saying there is anything wrong,” Jazz continued. “They’re probably having a late-night dinner.”

Al nodded, trying to ignore the look that passed between the women.

“Anyway, if, and that’s a big if, something nefarious is going down, a half decent attorney will throw out any evidence you collect. And from the sound of it, this guy has an amazing attorney. And obviously you can’t arrest him. So I will repeat the question. Have you called the NYPD?”

“And tell them what? That the love of my life is meeting a guy about a job, and I think he’s creepy? This may not be my jurisdiction, but I’m pretty sure they don’t send an officer for that.”

Jazz blinked. “Your who now?”

“My best friend.” He looked at Jazz’s surprised face, then over to Diane, whose mouth hung open. “What? You knew that already. We share a duplex. We’ve been friends forever.”

“That is not what you said.” Jazz shook her head slowly.

He looked back at Diane who grinned and licked her lips. “Not at all. Damn, Lindsey is going to freak.”

The fuck was wrong with these women? He just wanted to get to Jeannie as quickly as possible. What was with all this talking?

“I’m a little stressed at the moment, obviously. What, did I get my verb tense wrong or something?”

Jazz rubbed her hands together and narrowed her eyes. A chill ran down his spine. Fuck, her lawyer pose was back. “When referring to Ms. Knight, you said—and I quote—‘the love of my life.’”

“What? No, of course I didn’t.” Al rested his head in his hands. “Shane, how much longer?”

“Ten minutes. And you totally said ‘love of your life.’”

Shit. He looked back at Jazz. She’d probably already planned their honeymoon, based on all her questions about vacations. He needed to be gentle and not shove his love for another woman in her face. “I meant love in a friendly kind of way. Because we’ve known each other almost all our lives, and we have this kind of familial like—” Al cringed. Definitely not familial. “Like a platonic-ish—” if platonic meant his dick got hard every time he thought of her. “You know there’s another language. Greek maybe. Or could be Korean. Anyway, they have a bunch of different words for love that are based on the relationship you have. I meant one of those loves. Actually, I’ve been studying that language on my phone. I guess at this point I’m so fluent my brain got confused.”

Jazz’s lip turned up. “You’re fluent in another language, but you don’t know if it’s Greek or Korean?”

“I mean, yeah, that’s, yeah. Exactly.” Al nodded, surprised she was buying this. Maybe he should be a real actor, not just the reality TV kind. “It’s like, I know what

language I'm fluent in, I just don't know the English word for it because of how immersed I am. It's as natural as my first language."

Jazz licked her lips, nodding. "Your first language being ..." she prodded.

"English." Al's face scrunched as he realized his mistake. He snapped his fingers. "I guess I'm like, ninety-nine percent fluent in the other one. But hey, only one more word to go!" He leaned back against the chair with a sigh of relief. That was close. Hopefully they were almost at Wonder Tower.

Jazz looked at him, then over to Diane. "I sure hope you got all that."

Diane burst into laughter. "Oh, I totally did. It's a good thing you switched sides from delinquent to deputy because you are a shit liar."

"Seriously, buddy," Shane added with a laugh. "I've seen extras act better than that."

Fuck. Al took a deep breath and twisted his body to face Jazz. "Look, I'm sor—"

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

“Don’t.” Jazz grabbed his hands in hers and squeezed. She turned to the camera and smiled. Diane smiled back, giving her an encouraging nod. “It’s okay, really. I’ve enjoyed getting to know you, but I don’t see a future with us as anything but friends.”

Al looked at his feet. Jazz was an amazing woman, just not the woman for him. So brave and strong, he admired the way she’d turned the tables to make it look like she was rejecting him. He’d let her have that though. It was the least he could do after crushing her hopes and dreams in the back of a fake cop car while on the way to rescue the woman he actually loved.

“We’re here.” Shane pulled into the emergency parking spot, and they all piled out of the car.

“Woah, woah, woah. What do y’all think you’re doing?” Al asked the group as they gathered on the sidewalk.

“Helping you rescue Jeannie, obviously.” Shane pushed the lock button on the key fob. “My date with her was a bit of a flop, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care what happens to her. Besides, I played a detective in *Martian Marshals of Outer Space*. They’ll totally believe I’m a real cop.” He pointed to the building. “One quick flash of this shiny plastic badge and they’ll let us go wherever we want.”

Al nodded. Maybe Shane wasn’t a completely useless human being after all. “Right, you’re in. But you ladies stay behind.” They seemed to get along well, which was good. Jazz was probably waiting for him to leave before she broke down into hysterics, and Diane could give her some womanly support.

Jazz snorted. “Please. I’m going to make sure you don’t fuck up any evidence that the DA up here will need to nail this guy to the wall.”

Another good point. Jazz could stay, too. But not Hunter’s younger sister.

“Sorry, Diane. Your brother—”

“You do realize I’m an adult, right? I live by myself and everything. He doesn’t dictate my life. And besides, I’m filming everything. Whether it’s evidence for a trial or the epic ending of a reality show, you need me, too. So stop yapping and let’s go.”

She was right. They couldn’t waste any more time. “Marina checked with her connections and said to start on the fiftieth floor. That’s where his suite is.” It was time to rescue his girl.

Chapter 38

“Oh, good, she’s moving. I thought she’d be out for hours.”

Jeannie heard a woman’s voice. It sounded familiar, but it was hard to tell. The sound was muffled, like she had cotton stuck in her ears.

“You’ve really got the dosing down, Uncle V.”

A man’s laughter filled the air, jolting Jeannie out of the fog.

“Experience, my dear. Don’t worry, you’ll get there one day,” he answered.

Fuck, was that Victor? Gah, she knew something was off with that old fart.

“Did you wire the money to my account?” The woman’s voice was clearer now. And

Jeannie knew who she was. The same woman she'd befriended over the last several weeks.

"Did you do everything I asked?"

Iona huffed. "She's here, isn't she? I blew up her life in that small town, so she's got nothing left there. I may not have snagged the guy, but it doesn't matter. I planted enough doubt in her mind. But even if she's so pathetic to want my sloppy seconds, it doesn't matter. He proposed to that lawyer chick."

"Excellent. The money will be in your account by morning. You can leave us."

Iona laughed. "Daddy was right. You are one sick fuck. There are kinks, and then there are kinks. But hey, you do you! Have fun, and we'll see you at Christmas."

Jeannie listened to her footsteps leave, closing a door behind her. She fought the urge to shiver. Why was she so cold?

"You can open your eyes, little Jeannie. I know you're awake."

She took a deep breath. So much for playing dead. But this was fine. Being awake would play to her advantage. She was smart and had talked her way out of dozens of hairy situations in the past.

She slowly opened her eyes and gasped as she took in the room. It reminded her of the inside of a circus tent. Long strips of brightly colored fabric covered the walls. They started in the center of the ceiling, then draped down. The floor was littered with decorative pillows and poufs, almost giving the vibe of a—

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" she shouted, looking down at her barely there outfit. She was wearing a light pink crop top with gold chains circling her chest

and waist, with matching pink see-through harem pants with tiny little pink panties underneath. Around her neck was a gold choker, attached to a long chain hooked to the floor. “You stuck me in a genie sex dungeon?”

Victor licked his lips. “Glad you understand the situation. You know, if anyone else had told me I couldn’t have Marina back, I would have ended them that night. But there was something special about you. She was just one person, one pretty little singer in a sea of pretty little singers. But you, my dear, are a kingmaker. You make success out of nothing. You make dreams come true. I knew I had to have you for my collection.” He took off his suit jacket and set it on one of the poufs. Then he loosened his tie and unbuttoned the first button on his shirt. “I’m ready to make my first wish.”

Holy Jesus. This guy was out of his mind. Maybe she shouldn’t have laughed so hard at Al about his pube-stealing witch. Damn karma. But it was fine. Al had taught her self-defense. She might be on a leash, but her arms and legs were free. She just needed to buy a little time, play his weird freaky game, and then, shazam! Karate chop his balls off.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

She rubbed her hands together and nodded. “Yeah, okay sure. Let’s hear it. Wish number one.” Jeannie fought the urge to roll her eyes.

“I wish for you to fall in love with me.”

“Uh, good one.” Jeannie put her palms together and bowed her head. “Ping! Wish granted.” She shook her head, her high ponytail swaying back and forth. This guy was so stupid. “Ohh, Victor, you’re home! So good to see you. Did you have a nice day?”

She smiled brightly, drawing on years of experience to keep up the ruse. She was Southern and fake sincerity was encoded in her DNA. It was an unusual superpower, but it was hers, nonetheless.

“Oh genie, it was so stressful. Everyone expects so much from me, and it’s so hard to run a company.” He pouted, his bottom lip sticking out.

Jeannie smiled, an idea forming in her head. “Perhaps you’d like a massage, er, Master?” She patted her hand on the pouf in front of her.

Victor beamed, his face lighting up. “You are perfect.” He sat down and took off his shirt, leaving on his dingy white undershirt. “I’m eager to see what your hands can do.”

Jeannie’s nose scrunched. Gross. She walked to the small table that held an assortment of beautiful bottles. She had to hand it to him, he really had gone all out on the room. It’d make a great Airbnb, minus the kidnapping and creepy old man part.

Finding a small bottle of oil, she walked over to where he sat on the pouf, setting the extra slack from her leash next to her foot.

She stood behind him, her body shaking in revulsion. I can do this. During their training sessions, Al had always drilled into her the importance of putting herself first. She closed her eyes, thinking back to one of their sessions.

“Shady fuckers deserve a shady ending. Don’t feel bad if you have to gouge out an eyeball. If they put you in the position where you would even consider sticking your finger in their eye socket and shoving out their eyeball, they’ve done some serious shit and deserve it.” He’d stared into her eyes, brushing the hair from her face. “You stay alive. No matter what occurs. I will find you.”

Or maybe that was Last of the Mohicans. Whatever. She stared at the length of chain, solidifying her plan. If it worked, she’d owe a lot to Marina’s sci-fi movie nights.

Chapter 39

The elevator reached the fiftieth floor, and Al used the key card “Officer Shane” had commandeered from the security desk to open the door.

“Follow my lead, got it? Our priority is to find Jeannie and make sure she’s safe. Second priority is to kick that sorry motherfucker’s ass.”

“Hell, yeah!” Diane shouted. She hoisted the camera onto her shoulder. “We’re rolling!”

Jazz looked at her and grinned. Shane nodded, smoothing his hair and checking his breath in his hand. “I’ve taken down an army of assassins and a coven of vampires. I can handle this.”

Al smiled. It wasn't his usual team, but they would do. He banged on the door leading to the suite.

"Open up! Pizza delivery!" He waited a few seconds, and when nothing happened, he took the key card and swiped, opening the door. The suite was not what he expected. Instead of a large sitting area with a crystal chandelier and big screen TV, there was a long hallway with lots of doors.

Jazz ran to the first one and tried to open it, but it was locked. "Pass me the key!" she shouted, and Al tossed her the card. The door opened, and inside they found a small room decorated like a hospital room. A woman in a nurse's uniform was huddled on the bed.

"Hey, honey," Jazz said in whispered tones. "I'm Jazz. What's your name?"

The woman looked up, eyes darting at the group of people standing in the doorway. "Beth."

"Do you want to get out of here?" Jazz asked.

"Yeah, but—" She held up her hand, which was handcuffed to the bed rail.

Jazz took a deep breath. "We can take care of that. You aren't staying a second longer than you need to. Do you know where he keeps the key?"

Beth's eyes filled with tears as she shrugged.

"I got it," Shane announced, pushing his way into the room. "I played a street urchin in *Les Mis* during my method acting days." He pulled a hair pin from Jazz's elaborate updo and began to pick the lock.

They heard a scream, and Al ripped the key card from Jazz's hand and ran out of the room. "Jeannie!" he shouted.

There was more shouting, and Al followed the noise until he got to the last room in the hall. He opened the door to see Jeannie standing behind an old fat creep like an avenging angel. She was wearing a ridiculously hot outfit—not that he was thinking about that—with gold chains crisscrossing her body. Her hands held a thicker chain, which she was currently using to strangle the man.

His eyes bulged from his head, and as he gasped for air, she leaned down to his ear. "Nothing against genies, but I'm more of a Princess Leia girl."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Al snapped out of his frozen state. “Jeannie! That’s enough!” Not that the man deserved mercy, but he didn’t want her to take a life if she didn’t have to.

Jeannie looked up, her eyes dazed as she continued to pull on the chain.

He stepped forward slowly. “It’s over. You did great, Jeannie-girl. And now I’m going to take you out of here.”

Jeannie blinked several times before finally dropping the chain as the man slumped to the floor. “Al?” she asked.

“Yeah, baby.”

She stared at him, and her eyes filled with tears. “You’re really here?”

“I’m here. In this weird-ass room.” He looked around, taking in the ribbons of tulle and exotic decorations. “You look fucking hot though.”

Jeannie blinked again, looking down at her genie costume and a laugh burst from her chest. She grinned, the fog vanishing from her eyes as her strength returned. “You bet your ass I do.” She raised an eyebrow. “You know me. If I’m going to get kidnapped, I’m going to do it like a boss.” She sauntered toward him, and he held his arms out to her.

“That’s my girl.” He held her close, not wanting to think about how close he’d come to losing her. After several long minutes, he loosened his hold long enough to kiss her lightly on the forehead. “I think it’s time we go home.”

“Yeah, I’ve had enough of city life.”

“Me too. I just want to put on my uniform and go back to work. Hunter told me someone’s been stealing Mr. Bill’s pine straw. And Axe wants to go on a honeymoon.”

“When did he get married? We haven’t been gone that long.”

“Two years ago,” Al deadpanned.

“Oh dang. I definitely missed something.” She shook her head. “Well, I guess if you cover him now, he’ll owe you when you take yours.”

“Mine?”

“Uh, yeah. Don’t tell me you forgot you proposed to someone tonight? It was Jazz, right? Please tell me it was Jazz. Because Iona—”

Before Al could set her straight, Diane burst into the room. “Oh Jeannie, thank God you’re okay!” His eyes landed on Victor’s limp body. “Holy shit! Is he—”

“Just passed out,” Al answered. “How’s Beth?”

“Jazz is with her and the others. The police are on their way.”

“Others?” Jeannie and Al asked at the same time.

Diane shook her head. “This dude is a total sicko, y’all. There were six rooms here, each with a different theme and holding a different woman. It’s like he collected them or something.” She shivered. “Look, I need to film this room, not for the show because we are way past that. But just to make sure this is all documented for his

trial. How about you guys head out into the main room?”

Jeannie smiled. “Thanks, I owe you one.”

“Drinks at Susie’s?”

“Done!” Jeannie smiled and reached for Al’s hand. He guided her to the front room where Jazz and Shane sat with several scared women in various costumes.

Jazz jumped up when she saw them and gave Jeannie a big hug. “I am so glad to see you. Are you okay? He didn’t do anything, did he?”

“No, he didn’t get the chance. He wanted me to massage him, so I played along until I got close enough to choke his fat Jabba the Hutt ass with my leash.”

“Good work.” Jazz gave her a high five. “The police will want a statement. I’d say there’s no way they could peg this as anything but self-defense, but ...” She shrugged. She reached into her bra and pulled out a dollar, laughing. “Mercedes taught me well.” She put the dollar in Jeannie’s hand. “Okay now give me that dollar.”

Jeannie handed it back to her. “Great. Now I’m your attorney. Don’t say shit to the police unless I’m with you.”

“Oh, thanks. That’s really nice of you.” Jeannie looked from Al to Jazz. She nodded, then smiled. “I’m glad we’ll be neighbors.”

“Neighbors?” Jazz said.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:38 am

Jeannie looked back at Al, who was shaking his head. “Right, yeah. You probably want to live somewhere else. I get it.”

Al put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. “I didn’t propose to Jazz.”

Jeannie gasped. “Iona? Seriously? You know she’s Victor’s niece, right? And all that bad luck I was having came from her? Jesus, Al. One day you’ve got to learn to quit thinking with your dick. Jazz is a wonderful woman and—”

Al covered her mouth with his hand. “We’re going to put a pin in the niece thing, but I didn’t propose to Iona either. I left before the arraignment finished. But even if I hadn’t, I wasn’t going to propose.”

Jeannie gasped. “Al, how could you? What about your contract? You were supposed to find love and propose!”

“Fuck the contract, Jeannie. Nothing is more important than you.”

“But what about Ben?”

“Do you honestly think your brother wouldn’t sacrifice his safety for yours?”

Her eyes welled with tears as she shook her head. “But he’s sacrificed too much already.”

Al nodded, cupping her face with his hands. “He has. But so have we. We’ve spent

every day for longer than I care to remember planning and scheming for ways to make money and get him free. And we won't stop, but there's no way in hell I'll put you in danger. Not for anything."

Jeannie bit her lip and nodded.

"Besides, I did find love."

"You did?" Her eyes widened.

"Yes." He chuckled. God, he loved this woman. "But it happened before the show started." He leaned forward and kissed her gently. "About a year before, if you want to get technical." He stared deep into her eyes. "And I'm talking about you, in case that isn't clear. Turns out we really suck at communication."

Jeannie nodded. "Yeah, we do. I've been so scared to tell you how I really felt. I said it was about Ben, but that was an excuse. When Victor had me locked up in the genie sex dungeon—"

Al growled and Jeannie rolled her eyes before continuing. "I wasn't afraid. Irritated, yes, but not afraid. And that was all because of you. Because you taught me to take care of myself, and because I knew you would find me before it got too late. And you did. So if I'm not afraid of being locked in a creepy ass genie bottle, I'm not going to be afraid of loving you either. And, heaven help me, but I am head over heels in love with you. You were never just a one-night stand." Jeannie reached behind Al's neck and pulled her lips onto his.

"Oh my god! That was amazing! Diane, did you get all that?" Jazz shouted.

"Yeah, baby, I got it," Diane said, lowering the camera to the floor and fanning herself. "Best ending ever!"

Al and Jeannie stopped kissing and turned to look at the women. “Baby?” they said in unison.

Jazz blushed a dark shade of red. “Oh, it’s, you know.” She waved her hand in the air.

Diane raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. “He just made out with someone else, with tongue and everything. You won’t hurt his feelings.”

Jazz opened her mouth, then closed it, nodding. “You’re right. Excellent observation, sweetie. Al, I’ve been hooking up with Diane behind your back. Sorry, not sorry.”

Al’s mouth dropped and Jeannie burst into laughter. “Wait, was that y’all’s DNA all over the beach house?” he asked.

“Fuck no,” Diane said, shaking her head. “Do you think I would have suggested the black light if it was? We used the Conjugal Suite.”

Shane cleared his throat. “Well, if it’s confession time,” he paused, loosening the collar of his uniform, “that was me.”

“What?” Al threw his arms into the air. “Who were you fucking?”

“Mercedes,” he said with a shrug. “And the twins.”

Al slapped his hand over his face.

“And Judy, too.” His eyes got a far-off look. “And let me tell you, that little librarian knew some things. Never discount the sexual prowess of a girl who reads. She even taught me some shit.”

“So, wait,” Jeannie interrupted, looking at Al. “You didn’t hook up with any of

them?”

“No. None of them were you.”

“But I saw ...”

“Just wait till you see the tape, Jeannie.” Diane laughed. “Just you wait.”

Epilogue

“Al, we’re going to be late!” Jeannie moaned as her body flooded with heat. Her back was against the shower wall, and Al was on his knees in front of her.

He looked up with a devilish gleam in his eyes. “Then we’ll be late. It’s just a watch party, and it’s not as if we don’t know what happens. Now come on, you can give me another one.” He kissed her inner thigh where her leg rested over his shoulder and dove back into her wet heat.

“Fine, fuck it.” Being on time was overrated, especially when it meant stopping Al’s tongue from working its magic. She threaded her fingers through his hair and pushed him into her before finding her second orgasm of the afternoon.

After patting her dry with a fluffy towel, he carried her to his bed. He worshipped her body slowly, kissing every part of her from her ankle up to her breasts.

Jeannie moaned as her body lit up. “Al, you wouldn’t be trying to butter me up before I watch your season as the country’s most eligible deputy, would you?”

He thrust his hard cock inside her, picking up his pace as he peppered her with kisses.

“That depends. Is it working?”

Jeannie laughed. “Maybe. Keep going and I’ll let you know.”

His eyes met hers, and the intensity of the love she saw there set her off again. “I’ll never stop. Not as long as I live, Jeannie-girl.”

“She threw up on the carriage ride?” Jeannie twisted in Al’s lap to look into his eyes. They’d just finished watching a special preview marathon of the entire season of Law of Attraction.

“Yep.”

“She didn’t give you a blow job?” Her heart clenched. After the rescue, she’d made a conscious decision to look forward and not think about any of the past dates Al had been on. By her own design, they weren’t together at the time, and she’d practically forced him onto the show. It wouldn’t be fair to hold anything he’d done with the other women against him. But to know he really hadn’t hooked up with anybody else?

“Nope.”

“That bitch.” She grinned, leaning over to give Al a quick kiss. They were surrounded by their friends, all seated at their favorite table at Susie’s Bar. “Jazz, do you think they can add more time to her sentence?”

“For being a lying cow? Unfortunately, no.”

Victor had pleaded guilty and was serving fifty years for holding multiple women against their will. Iona had been given one year for aiding him with Jeannie’s capture.

She'd also been the one who'd sent anonymous letters to her clients, causing them to drop her and all the other mishaps Jeannie had endured.

"That was amazing!" Marina sighed as she leaned back in her chair.

Al turned to her and smiled. "I'm sure you recognized some of your lines. Your tutoring sessions saved my ass a dozen times. I couldn't have made it through without you."

"And don't forget about me!" Diane cried. "I pulled the fire alarm and saved you from Iona's evil clutches."

Marina giggled. "The whole show was amazing. Definitely the best reality dating show I've ever watched."

"Now Marina," Rose began. "Are you sure you're not just saying that because you know the star?" A small cry came from the baby carrier, and Rose reached over to pick up Isabella. Nick hadn't attended the preview party, probably helping Axe with something. Or he stayed home because he hated these parties.

"No!" Marina said sincerely. "This show had all the classic elements of catfights and crying women which is what we expect. But throw in the host screwing half the contestants, the camerawoman stealing the top pick, and the bachelor going home with his publicist?" She flopped back into her chair. "It's going to take me weeks to recover!"

Initially, Lindsey had been horrified by the turn of events. That is until she saw the extra b-roll footage that Diane had shot. Once she reviewed the tape of all the behind-the-scenes drama, Lindsey dug into the subplots and had already cleared shelf space for her fourth Emmy.

“Well, I definitely owe you a drink,” Al said to her, “or fifty since you also saved Jeannie. What do you want? Margarita? Daiquiri?”

“Oh, water is fine,” she said.

“Water?” Rose asked. “Since when do you turn down ... no way!”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:39 am

Marina grinned and took a sip from her glass.

“Eek!” squealed Snow. “This is so exciting! I can’t wait to finish this term so I can be around all these babies all the time!”

“Does someone want to fill me in?” Diane asked.

“We’re expecting,” Christian said as he returned to the table, maneuvering Marina out of her chair so she could sit in his lap.

The table erupted into cheers as everyone congratulated the couple.

“Thanks, we couldn’t be happier. And we have other good news.” He gave Hunter a pointed look. “It’s done, you can tell them now.” He nodded toward Jeannie and Al.

Hunter grinned and rubbed his hands together. “We didn’t want to say anything before and get your hopes up, but guys, Ben was set up.”

“No shit,” Al said, rolling his eyes. “We’ve always known that.”

Hunter sighed and continued. “But it wasn’t some random boyfriend of his mom’s. It’s deeper than that. The district attorney was up for re-election, and it was going to be close. Ben’s conviction gave him the win he needed to grab those final votes. We suspect he paid Deputy Ingall to plant and magically find the evidence. Unfortunately, we can’t ask Ingall because he died a few years ago, but the five-thousand-dollar payment to his bank account is suspicious.”

Christian cleared his throat. “Dad must not have realized what was going on. There’s no way he would have been part of that.”

Jeannie let out a deep breath. “I never realized it was this complicated.”

Christian nodded. “That D.A. is no longer in Grimm County, but he is still practicing. For now. The attorney general plans to bring him up on charges of conspiracy and manufacturing evidence. I’m sure he’ll be disbarred soon, too.

Jeannie squealed. “Al, we have to call the attorney. She needs to know this ASAP.”

“Actually, we’ve been in touch for a while. And,” Hunter grinned, looking at Snow, “you seem to have forgotten, but you have a United States senator on speed dial.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Al asked, looking at Snow.

“Do you want to, like, expedite Ben’s passport or something? That’s sweet, I guess.” Jeannie’s brows furrowed and she twirled a lock from her ponytail. It was a nice idea. He probably would want to travel once he got out.

Snow giggled. “Y’all are such a breath of fresh air. As a senator, I can open doors more quickly than you can and put pressure on people, like the governor, AKA my godfather, to turn the wheels of justice faster.”

“Ohhhh,” Jeannie and Al said together. Jeannie had always thought of Snow as a good friend, and it never occurred to her to ask Snow to use her influence to help her brother.

“After Hunter told me what he suspected, I also reached out to your lawyer. Then I made a few more calls, and long story short, Ben’s record will be expunged, and he’ll likely be getting a nice settlement from the county’s insurance company.”

Jeannie's mouth dropped, and Al's eyes filled with tears. Could this really be over? After all this time?

The bar door swung open with a bang and Nick walked in. "Delivery!"

He stepped to the side, revealing a man standing behind him. His beard was scruffy, and his blonde hair was longer than she'd last seen it. There was a haunted look in his eyes that hadn't been there before, but even still, Jeannie would recognize her brother anywhere.

"Ben!" She jumped from the table and ran into his arms with Al following close behind her.

"Hey, careful guys!" Ben chuckled as he stumbled backward a few steps. The three of them stood there for several minutes, embraced in a group hug that was years overdue.

"And for the record," Snow called out, "Next time you need help, call me first before doing something crazy like ... I don't know, going on a reality dating show when you're hopelessly in love with each other."

Jeannie stepped back, wiping the tears from her eyes. "We've got to go home. Like right this second. I need to clean out a path in my spare room so Ben can find the bed."

"Or," Al grinned, "you could let him have your room. It's not like you've been sleeping there lately."

"I do not need to hear that, Al," Ben said, scrunching his nose. "Don't you know you aren't supposed to antagonize the newly released?"

Jeannie rolled her eyes and turned back to Al. "I guess that would work for tonight.

But long term we'll still need to clear out that room."

"Not if you lived on my side of the duplex."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:39 am

“On your side?” Her breath caught. She sort of already did live on his side, but they hadn’t talked about it. Not out loud.

“My tub is bigger.” Al reached for her hand and pulled her close.

“True. But my couches are nicer.”

“But my bed is a king.”

Jeannie cocked her head to the side. “And you did get that brand new mattress.”

“That’s not all I got.” Al lowered to one knee.

Jeannie gasped and raised her free hand over her mouth.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the diamond ring he’d picked out while in New York, knowing the second he saw it that it’d look perfect on Jeannie’s finger. “Jeannie, I loved you before I knew what love was. You’ve been my best friend, but more than that, you’ve been the other half of my soul. When I think of my future, it only works with you in it. Be my forever. Marry me.”

The tears fell from her face. “Are you sure? You want forever with me?”

His eyes glistened as he looked up at her. “I want everything with you.”

“I want that too.”

“Then say yes.”

Jeannie bit her lip, her eyes darting around the room and landing on her brother. Maybe this was bad timing. Maybe they needed to get him settled in first. Maybe—

Ben smiled and nodded, giving her the silent approval she needed.

Relief flooded through her, and she broke into a huge smile. “Yes. Let’s do it. Let’s get married!”

Al slid the ring over her finger and stood up to spin her in his arms.

Al laughed. “And so you’ll move over to my side now?”

“Well, I mean, you did put a ring on it, so I might as well.”

Jeannie’s phone buzzed in her pocket, and she heard Diane snicker in the background.

She pulled out her phone and groaned. “Damnit Diane!”

“What’s wrong?” Al asked.

Jeannie rolled her eyes. “Lindsey heard about our engagement and offered \$30,000 to film the wedding.”

Al grabbed her phone and tossed it into onto the table “Absolutely not, Jeannie-girl. From here on out, other than Grimm County Lawmen, the only filming I want to do is with you, me, and my king sized—“

“My ears!” Ben shouted.

Jeannie laughed. “Agreed. And no more selfies and promos either. Just you and me, Aloysius.”

“Just you and me, Jeanine.” Al grabbed Jeannie and dipped her into a deep kiss.

THE END
