



# Grinch Girl

**Author:** *Michelle Dayton*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Sometimes, the real story isn't the beautiful city girl returning to her small town to save Christmas—it's the townie chick who never left.

Jane Zielinski has her hands full this December, working three jobs and directing a homemade reality dating web series, *Single Bells*, as a stunt to keep her small town competitive with the ritzy resort towns luring tourists. Then the gorgeous Bella Bradley, Jane's childhood BFF who had no qualms about skipping town when times got tough, returns with handfuls of cash and her smoking-hot business partner Nate Wright on her arm.

Jane can't believe she's being upstaged again, especially when Bella uses the *Single Bells* activities to rekindle a romance with her high school boyfriend—the man Jane had envisioned her future with. So if a little competition could convince Bella to leave town—again—Jane is ready to take the mittens off. And she's not above sabotage, cheating, or flirting with Nate to win.

These childhood friends turned rivals may have more in common than they thought. Let the reindeer games begin...

**Total Pages (Source):** 72

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

## Chapter One

Oh crap. Thisguy again.

Smoothing the front of my waitressing apron over my jeans, I grabbed the coffeepot from the burner and reluctantly made my way to the two-top the hostess just sat in my section.

The ruddy-faced, bleary-eyed occupant of the table was blabbing loudly into his cell phone, dropping very loud F-bombs in spite of the fact that a family with two toddlers was sitting right next to him.

Apparently, this dude was just as annoying at the breakfast table as he'd been last night pounding vodka shots in the resort bar.

The Grand Vienna Resort was a few towns over from mine, about a forty-minute drive. It was a huge place that drew in tourists year-round because of their convention center, spa, manmade ski hill, stables, and indoor water park. I didn't work here year-round, but turning down holiday tips wasn't something I could afford to do, so I picked up the phone when they called yesterday. Over the past several years, it had become something of a sad Thanksgiving-week tradition.

Gritting my teeth, I approached his table to offer him coffee. Last night he'd tried everything he could think of to lure me back to his hotel room—including throwing a wad of cash on the bar—as though sex could be ordered just like the multiple baskets of hot wings he'd eaten.

Ugh, why had I taken the morning shift too? The quarterly meeting of my town's Small Business Association wasn't until two p.m., and I didn't need to open the shop until four. I had noGeek Squad appointments lined up today, and since I'd worked a shift until close last night, I should have just stayed home this morning. I should have taken advantage of a perfectly rare little window of time in which I could have lounged in bed, watching TV and drinking my own coffee.

He didn't even look up at me. He just waved his fingers toward his empty coffee cup and said, "Bring me a Bloody Mary too."

Into the phone, he chortled gleefully, "You know it, baby. Hair of the dog! Yeah, I'll be back in the city in a few hours. Gonna pop in the office this afternoon, but I'll meet you out around six, yeah? Awesome." Pause. "Yeah, it was all right. Conference was worthwhile, made some good contacts."

He lowered his voice, but since I was still standing right there, it was easy to hear the sly lie through curved lips. "Banged a hot townie chick last night."

I snorted and spoke loudly enough that whoever was on the other end of his call could hear me clearly. "No, you tried to bang a hot townie chick last night. Before you got escorted back to your room on account of being a drunken a—" I caught the eye of the cherubic toddler at the next table "—a-hole."

The jerk sputtered into his phone, and the toddler said, "Mommy, what's an a-hole?"

I strode back to the kitchen, hiding a smile at the tiny bit of chaos I'd caused. I wouldn't get in trouble with anyone else working. Wisconsin winters were long, and this one was just starting. Most of us were always a few bucks short of rent, despite constantly scrounging.

You took your fun where you found it.

Luckily, my shift ended ten minutes later. I threw on my beat-up leather jacket, thick gray scarf, and sunglasses. My spirits lifted a bit in the fresh air on the ten-minute walk to the staff parking lot.

I started my ancient truck and headed home. Avoiding the main intersections of Vienna, I drove around the big lake.

The fall foliage season was well and truly behind us. Most of the big trees were completely stripped, soaring starkly naked to the gray sky. Big patches of farmland looked flat and brown, everything already harvested.

But then you'd turn a corner and the bright blue of the lake through the bare trees could take your breath away. Even from me, who'd lived here my entire life.

Of course, everything would look much prettier once it snowed. The thick white carpet made the farmland look cozy and blanketed. The snow clinging to the trees fattened them up and made everything shimmer.

And in my town, Falworth, the one farthest from the lake, the smallest in the area with its population dwindling every year, the coverage of snow made it look a hell of a lot less poor.

My car circled the Falworth town center. A handful of small businesses squatted around "the square"—an empty lot the size of half a football field. In the middle, a dirty, broken sign read Happy Holidays. No enterprising person had thrown up the message this week to anticipate Thanksgiving, however. It had been up since last year at this time, all through spring and summer and fall. The second Y was crooked and about to fall off.

The town's Christmas Village would be set up here. There was a rusted gazebo and stage in the center of the square, which had hosted live music, dances, and even

pageants, longer ago in the past. There was a separate rectangular area that typically became a skating rink. At least it used to—I hadn't so much as walked through the square during the holiday season last year, not even when Greta had teasingly offered to win me a teddy bear from one of the carnival games. "Grinch!" she'd accused affectionately.

As always, my chest tightened. Greta, the fiery, fierce grandmother I'd never had, more mother to me than my own, cherished and beloved friend. She'd been gone two months, and although she'd been sick for almost a year prior to her passing, I still couldn't wrap my head or heart around it.

I parked my car at the edge of the square and hiked to the diner, the one place in this desolate center of town that was always bustling. Carol could be a little talkative for my taste, but she made outstanding coffee, and she kept the prices low. The flocks of summer tourists kept her flush year-round, but she always said the diner was really for the locals.

Carol had been Greta's closest friend. On mornings when I could barely breathe because of missing her so much, I didn't want to talk. I just liked to sit in the diner and know that Carol felt the same way.

The coffee was black and strong and filled to the brim of the heavy mug.

Carol dropped the laminated menu that I knew by heart on the table in front of me and raised a pointed eyebrow. "Temp is in the low forties today and getting colder tomorrow. Might want to put on one of your warmer coats, Jane."

I stared at her, expressionless, over the rim of my coffee mug until she shrugged and walked away. Of all the things I loathed about small towns—and this one in particular—comments like Carol's were the worst. The fact that everyone knew the minutiae of each other's lives drove me bananas. Some days I longed to live among

strangers and the unknown so strongly that minor exchanges like this could turn my mood sour all day. Which was saying something because I was not exactly a perky ray of sunshine to begin with.

Yeah, I did own a warmer coat. Two actually. Not that I cared to explain myself, but I had a very particular system with my coats. The Wisconsin winter lasted for forever. Let's say you counted forty degrees Fahrenheit as winter-ish weather. In Wisconsin, the temp could dip into the forties in friggin' October and still occasionally be down in the forties in April.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

In my opinion, it was best to work the system with different outerwear. I wore my leather jacket as long as I could possibly stand it, usually until the temp went into the thirties. Then, I'd switch to my first parka, and I'd feel warm and incredible for weeks. That coat would work until the temp dropped into the teens, and then I'd need to pull on the Big Daddy. The expensive, insulated navy coat Greta had given me as a combined birthday-Xmas present six years ago, our last great tourist year, when the shop had done really well.

"What time are you opening today?" Carol asked after taking my omelet order and refilling my coffee.

I rolled my eyes at her. "Four," I said. Just like every single off-season weekday.

"I'm going to come in and grab some wine for my book club," she said cheerfully. "Can you look in Greta's register and see what I chose when I hosted last year? I can't remember what it was except that everyone liked it."

I nodded and forced a smile, grateful for her loyal business, but already dreading the task of poring through Greta's leather-bound register of sales. It wasn't really an accounting tool for her; it was more of a diary of her daily thoughts on her business. She tracked every sale to every customer, meticulous notes on exactly who bought what, and each page was also full of color commentary.

"Carol grabbed four bottles of the Pride Merlot for her book club. Those old birds are gonna get tipsy discussing Toni Morrison!"

"Two young men staying in Pete's Airbnb with their frat brothers bought three cases

of Busch Light. I offered them a couple of complimentary Gatorades for the morning.”

More recently, she’d added to the register when there weren’t expected sales.

“The Rotary Club is now buying their monthly meeting drinks from Walmart—that’s gonna hurt the bottom line.”

“The Yacht Club is now getting their reserve wine list from a new distributor in Vienna. Redo budget ASAP.”

That budget had ruined any peace I might have settled into after Greta passed. Although I’d been helping her out in the shop for years, and quite a bit more since she’d fallen ill, I’d had no idea how little money was coming in over the past couple of years. In September, I’d filled the same orders for new inventory that she’d done last fall, and now I was almost entirely out of operating cash. If I understood the entries in her QuickBooks software correctly, it looked like we usually got a boost from the holiday season. I was counting on it.

Running Greta’s store without her was not something I’d ever expected to do, but I couldn’t just let it die after she did. The last thing Greta had ever asked of me was to make a plan for improving my life. Taking over her small business was Step One.

While devouring the omelet, I pulled out my phone and organized my schedule for the next two days: this afternoon I’d attend the Falworth Small Business Association on behalf of Greta, then I’d open her shop for the evening. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving, so I’d open the shop for a few hours early in the day, hoping some locals might choose to run in to stock for their holiday celebrations instead of grabbing their libations from Piggly Wiggly.

The rest of the long weekend? Hmm.



Greta used to love Black Friday: she'd slash prices and offer complimentary wine tastings to the tourists kicking off the holiday season by strolling through the Christmas Village on the square.

I set my coffee cup on the table and frowned. Was I misremembering the timing, or shouldn't the Christmas Village be set up by now? Didn't it need to be ready for Thanksgiving so there was something for tourists to do here in the winter?

My eyes roamed over the diner tables. I recognized every single person in here. Not one tourist. Was that normal? Maybe people typically came after Thanksgiving, not the day before.

Yawning, I shrugged my jacket back on. I'd go home for a long, hot shower and relax before the meeting. There'd be at least four representatives from other Falworth small businesses there. They would show me the holiday season ropes.

\*

My apartment complex was half a mile away from the town center. In the summer months, when it was practically light until after nine p.m., I often walked between Greta's shop and home for my shifts. But now, when the sun went down at four and it was outer-space-black by nine, walking wasn't an option. Too dangerous; it was difficult for drivers to see pedestrians on the country roads.

My small, one-bedroom was nothing special, but I'd splurged on a wonderful mattress and duvet last year, and the warm comforts still made me happy every single day. I climbed out of my truck, jingling my keys, thoughts of going back to bed for a few hours at the forefront of my mind.

First, though, I needed to pick up my dog.

I knocked on my next-door neighbor's door. When Sean answered, his face fell. "Oh. Hey, Jane. You're here to get Bruce already?" Sean was only nineteen. He'd moved in over the summer, unceremoniously and with barely any furniture or utensils. Without exchanging our life stories, we'd quickly and silently bonded. Somehow I just knew that he was also the product of a much loved but damaged and unreliable mother.

Like most of us, Sean struggled to find steady winter employment. He occasionally helped me at the shop, and I was teaching him the tech skills he'd need to get hired as a member of the Geek Squad at Vienna's Best Buy. But his favorite thing in the world was dog-sitting.

I felt half-irritated and half-guilty at his crestfallen face. A couple of hours of lazing around in bed sounded much better when I pictured Bruce cuddling next to me. He was an awkwardly adorable mutt. His sturdy bear-like long body was much too big for his very short legs; he was not structurally sound. He could barely get downstairs. But his fur was fluffy and soft, and his constantly wagging floofy tail was a pure beacon of happiness.

When I'd adopted him a few years ago, I hadn't known he was epileptic. The daily medication to keep his seizures at bay—and the occasional vet bills when they occurred anyway—were not something I'd factored into my pet budget. So Bruce's care necessitated a few more waitressing shifts a month. Not ideal, but it wasn't like I would give him away just because he wasn't one hundred percent healthy and perfect all the time.

Too often humans do this: walk away when things are hard or when other people are difficult.

Bruce, however, wouldn't walk away even if the building was burning down. He'd (stupidly) wag and lick my face until the walls fell. So yeah, he was dumb and sick,

but also? Love personified.

Unfortunately for my current desire for dog cuddles, however, Sean's love for Bruce had grown just as strong as my own. "I could keep him until tomorrow," he mumbled, shifting his weight. "That way you won't have to worry about him while you're at your meeting and at the shop."

Sean knew very well I usually took Bruce to the shop with me, but I stifled a sigh and looked at him with big-sister eyes. Sean was never effervescent, but he was unusually low-energy and pale today.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

I bet this is his first Thanksgiving alone.

“Sure,” I relented. “Keep him overnight.” I jingled my keys and added in an offhand tone, “Bring him over around two tomorrow and we can eat together. I’ve got a turkey breast,” I lied, mentally adding a stop at the Pig to my evening plans. “It’s way too much meal for me. If I have leftovers, Bruce will try to eat it, and turkey is bad for dogs.”

Sean cocked his head slowly, but I’d seen the light flicker in his eyes. “OK. Should I, ah, bring anything?”

I frowned thoughtfully, my mind racing through the list of traditional Thanksgiving items, trying to find the easiest and least expensive. “Maybe some kind of mashed potato?” I said. “The Bob Evans microwavable ones are pretty good.” They were stocked at all the nearby groceries, and they weren’t too costly.

He nodded. “OK.” A quick, rare smile. “Thanks.”

“Yep.” I backed away and headed for my own door. “I’ll see you and Bruce tomorrow afternoon.”

\*

How long did it take to start a meeting?!

For God’s sake. I’d been sitting here for a good twenty minutes, fighting off stilted chitchat from the other members of the Falworth Small Business Association.

No, Diane, owner of the Square Bakery, I am not interested in your new talent of reading tarot cards. I certainly do not want mine read. Also, please stop telling me I should come shop at your thrift store. That's lovely that some "beautiful dresses" have come in. You've known me my whole life. Have I ever worn a dress? Not since senior prom.

To Jim, owner of the corner pub and the town bowling alley, I get it: the liquor distributors are gouging us all, but you need to manage your idiot-kid bartenders better. They're bleeding you dry with the amount of booze they pour into each drink for their friends.

The one person I wanted to talk to, Michael Perry, had been entrapped in conversation with Carol since the meeting started. Just because I couldn't talk to him didn't mean I couldn't idly stare. Even in high school, he'd never gone through an awkward phase. He'd been a cute little boy who grew straight into cute man, handsome in an outdoorsy and wholesome way.

I was glad he was here, but why did he come to these meetings? The way Greta had described the group to me, I had thought it was only struggling small businesses trying to find strategies—like the Christmas Village—that would mutually benefit them all.

Michael's businesses definitely weren't struggling. He owned two car washes in the nicer area towns as well as a few fast-food franchises in Vienna. For fun, he taught sailing lessons to kids during the summer. He was the kind of guy you called when you got a flat tire on a country road and you didn't have your spare because you used it when you had a flat tire a few months before, and how likely was it to get two flat tires in one summer, anyway?

After he'd rescued me with smiling roadside assistance last summer, I'd started to wonder: why didn't I date Michael? Wouldn't being with someone kind and cute and

steady be much better than my occasional flirtations with tourists? But then everything with Greta accelerated, and all summer efforts of pursuing Michael in a new way had died on the vine.

In the last month, though, I'd invited Michael out for coffee a couple of times. When the temp dipped below ten degrees one freakish morning last week, he'd called me to check that my truck had started. Now, he raised his eyes over Carol's perm and offered me a warm smile.

The third suggestion on Greta's list of items for my life improvement plan had been a relationship with a nice man. Michael certainly fit that description. I smiled back at him.

"Are you going to lead the meeting, Carol?" Michael asked politely.

Chatty Carol paused and flushed. Very uncharacteristic. Everyone, in fact, went silent, and several of the group shifted their weight on the cheap folding chairs.

Oh. In an instant, I knew what was wrong. Greta had led this group for the last twenty-five years. They probably couldn't even remember a meeting without her leadership.

"I'll kick us off," Diane offered, and the group's attention shifted to her. Especially when she threw her hands up and said, with all the finesse of a charging bull, "We're in trouble, kids."

A collective "we know" kind of moan rose into the air all around me, and I sat up straighter. What the hell was going on here?

Diane noticed my bewilderment and sent me a sad shrug. "Things are in bad shape, Jane. You probably noticed the Christmas Village isn't up. In the past, the association

would start to chip in money for the Christmas Village in the late summer. By the beginning of November, we'd have enough of an egg to build it, hire staff to run it, organize the entertainment, blah blah blah. But that didn't happen this year—most of us couldn't afford to donate anything to the pot. Because most of us are barely keeping our doors open.”

Michael opened his mouth, but little more than a peep escaped before Carol cut him off. “You already donate more than anyone, Michael. Greta was right to limit your contributions.”

He furrowed his brow and tried again, but Diane got right to the point yet again. “We also know your car wash in Wontana is in trouble. Financially, you're not exactly at your highest peak either.”

He shut his mouth with a snap, looked at the floor.

Like an idiot, I sputtered. “But there's always the Christmas Village.” Every year since I'd been born. One of Falworth's very few traditions. It was the thing that differentiated us from the other towns around here in the winter. Although, in recent years, it had been scaled back. Far fewer booths and decorations. The ice-skating rink only operated on weekends. No live music.

Jim sighed and folded his arms. “Things used to be different. Falworth was never like Vienna or Wontana. They're right on the lake, so they get the summer tourists with all the money.” Well, duh. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't know there. Falworth was a twenty-minute drive from the nearest shore. We still got tourists in the summer, but we got the ones with less money. The ones willing to stay in motels or shitty Airbnbs and drive to the water. There were still enough people to buy gas in our town, eat donuts at Diane's bakery or eggs at Carol's diner. Enough to fill their coolers with beer from Greta. Enough to wander into Jim's pub for their evening entertainment.

Enough to keep everyone afloat until the Christmas season, which brought in just enough to keep everyone afloat until April or May when it got warm enough for the lake season to start again.

Jim took another deep breath, possibly enjoying his role as explainer of the town's doom. "The big problem started about five years ago. Vienna and Wontana decided not to be content with their huge piles of summer gold. They decided to build up their winter tourism."



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Sure, I'd noticed that. The resort in Vienna was offering sleigh rides and Santa every weekend in December. I'd seen signs for a Winter Festival taking place mid-December but hadn't bothered looking into it. Wontana had built a huge outdoor ice rink, three times the size of ours.

"So," Jim went on, "when the tourists from Chicago and Milwaukee want to do a small-town Christmas celebration, they get on Google and they find pretty pictures of holiday celebrations in the other towns." He shrugged philosophically. "Why would they choose us? We can't compete anymore."

No winter tourists? I thought of the inventory in Greta's shop and the pitiful bank balance in the shop's account. I inhaled sharply and spoke without thinking. "But if I don't get the holiday bump, the shop won't make it through the winter."

The room went silent, and my cheeks flamed.

Then, Diane said: "Neither will the bakery. Or the thrift store."

And after a brief pause, Jim admitted: "Or the pub. Or the bowling alley."

Michael looked at everyone wide-eyed, the hero complex in him wanting to help. But how? He was in better shape than the rest of us, but he wasn't exactly doing great.

Carol's troubled expression suggested the same. Her diner might make it because it didn't depend wholly on tourists, but they had to account for a huge chunk of her business. Her eyes filled with tears. "If most of the businesses on the town square go under, it's not even our town anymore."

I had to ignore her whispered drama because my thoughts were running wild, trying to find practical solutions. “Couldn’t some of the bigger businesses in the area chip in for the Christmas Village?”

Falworth did have some industry, although not right on the town square. Just a mile away was a plant that made thermoplastic components. On the outskirts of town, another made pumps and pumping equipment. A food company a bit farther out made frozen vegetables. These bigger businesses kept hundreds of locals employed. Surely, they could help out the town.

A ghost of a smile crossed Carol’s face. “Greta said the exact same thing at our spring meeting. She contacted every place we could think of.”

The group sighed in unison. “Half of them ignored her entirely. The other half murmured something encouraging and contributed amounts so tiny, it was laughable.”

I didn’t understand. “Why?”

Jim crossed his arms over his chest. “Because Vienna and Wontana got to them first. The resorts and businesses over there are the main buyers of those companies’ products. If they asked for donations for their holiday celebrations, of course the big companies would donate their cash there instead of here.”

I almost stamped my booted feet like a little kid. “That’s infuriating.” I looked at their faces. Most of them looked really sad, but also...accepting? I suppose they’d had more time to come to terms with it than me.

Why was I so upset anyway?

When I was a teenager, all I’d wanted was to get out of this town. When that dream

died, I'd never really come to like it better. Why did I care if the town center faded away, like so many others in small-town America?

Because of Greta. She'd loved this town, and since she was special, it was a little special. She'd been gone two months, and now the whole place was going to go too? And how was I supposed to fulfill my promise to her, to make my life better, if I couldn't keep her shop going?

"If there's nothing else for us to cover, I'm gonna go." Jim got heavily to his feet. Rumor around town was that he and his wife Nicole weren't doing so well. Their money issues were likely a contributing factor.

The rest of the group started to stand and pull on their coats. Appalled, I jumped to my feet. "That's—that's it?" I exclaimed. "We're just conceding? No Christmas Village, no tourists, and our businesses all die? This is the end?"

Diane raised an eyebrow at me. "If you've got a better idea, we'd love to hear it."

## Chapter Two

Of course I didn't have a better idea.

I wasn't even officially a small-business owner. Not yet. When I'd asked the lawyer responsible for Greta's estate who the business would go to, he'd ignored my direct question and said he was still processing her last requests. I'd been calling him once a week since October, and he hadn't returned my messages. Maybe Greta had known what was coming, though, and decided not to leave anything related to the business to anyone. She wasn't in debt, but the business simply could not continue to function on current revenue.

"Let's meet again on Friday," Carol had suggested as everyone was leaving. "Let's

take the pitiful donations from the bigger businesses and at least decorate our own spaces in the square. It doesn't have to be for the damn tourists. We can make things look better just for us."

I don't think anyone exactly felt like decorating, but we all agreed anyway. What the hell else were we going to do on Black Friday? Wallow in our impending poverty?

On Thanksgiving, there was a knock on my door at the very crack of two. I launched myself off the couch, dying to put my face in Bruce's fur.

Bruce ran laps around my calves, and I waved Sean into the tiny kitchen nook, surprised that he was holding a plastic-wrapped bowl. Maybe he'd decided to bring something else instead of a carton of microwaved spuds. "What's that?"

"Mashed potatoes." He shrugged. "Homemade ones are better than the store ones, so I made some."

I snatched the bowl from him, peeled back the wrap and took a spoonful. "Oh!" I exclaimed over the delicious warm goodness that must have been half butter and sour cream. "You can cook."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Just a few things,” he mumbled offhand, but I could tell he was pleased. He looked around my living room as if someone else might have been hiding behind a curtain or something. “No one else is coming?”

“Nope.” I hadn’t had a family-type Thanksgiving or Christmas in a long time. Greta always traveled and, “Kelly—my mom—is always invited, but...” Kelly never turned down holiday time-and-a-half pay. She also tried not to attend celebratory events, if she could help it, which I totally respected. Not all addicts recognize triggers so well.

We ate the turkey breast I’d roasted, which was dry and almost flavorless, Sean’s potatoes, which were incredible, along with a salad and a store-bought pumpkin pie. A soda for Sean and a glass of cheap, ultra-buttery Chardonnay for me. Bruce kept us entertained during the meal by constantly butting our hips with his nose, snuffling for handouts.

After a glass of Chardonnay, the room seemed way too quiet, so I filled Sean in on the town’s woes. “That’s sad,” he said. “I always liked the Christmas Village in high school.”

Not me. “I liked it more when I was a little kid,” I said. Greta had always taken me and Bella for cocoas and to sit on Santa’s lap. By the time we were teenagers, we mostly thought we were too cool for it. And the area high school still had the Christmas Princess pageant back then, which I hated. Thank God the school board had finally realized how anachronistic it was and stopped it about five years ago.

“Well,” Sean said slowly, grinning a little. “I’m not sure if it was the Christmas Village I liked so much as the fact that there were sometimes a few cute girls from

out of town walking around.”

“That makes sense.” I grinned back at him for a moment. That was a familiar sentiment. Bella and I would blow out our hair and pull on our tightest jeans before strolling around the square, on the lookout for hot strangers.

Bella. It was either the thought of her or the grim new reality that there would no longer be any Christmas Village or out-of-town strangers that caused my grin to fade. “But not anymore, I guess.”

He sighed heavily. “Yeah. It’s gotten so...quiet...around here.”

So quiet. Quiet and dark and empty.

I grabbed the bottle of Chardonnay. “Want to watch some crap TV?”

“Sure,” he said, looking kind of fascinated. “I don’t even have a TV.”

“You don’t watch TV?” I gaped at him. I maybe could understand this if there was anything else to do in Falworth. “What do you do at night?”

He snorted. “I watch stuff, just not normal TV. I binge some series on Netflix on my laptop. Lately, I’ve been sort of into some web series too.”

Not wanting anything remotely holiday-related, I flipped on a few old episodes of *The Bachelor* stored on my ancient DVR.

“This show is terrible,” Sean announced, but he grabbed a fresh can of Sprite from the fridge and plopped down next to me. “But somehow I’ve seen at least a dozen episodes.”

“So has everyone in America,” I said, slurping wine. “It’s ridiculous. I hate-watch it.” We groaned and rolled our eyes every two minutes, and yet, we watched. Two full episodes.

“Why can’t we look away?” Sean wondered.

I had several theories. Dating shows in general were an eternally popular source of entertainment—they never went out of style because it was a distraction from your own life, pure and simple. Jeering at the fumbling bachelor and his idiotic harem kept me decidedly not focused on the shit show of my own life. I couldn’t deal with the tidal wave of fear and complicated emotions that yesterday’s meeting brought to life if I was too busy judging the behavior of these reality TV folks and wondering where I’d choose to go and what I would wear to my very own fantasy date.

Also, it was very easy to feel superior to these dum-dums who were crying and talking about soul connections to someone they’d spent less than thirty minutes alone with. I never felt superior to anyone in real life.

Sean went to grab the bowl of leftover potatoes, and we dove in with two spoons. “I beg of you, J. Can we please watch something else? My IQ is falling by the minute.”

So I switched it to *The Amazing Race*, another staple of much higher quality. I loved this one because when your life is navigating shit jobs and freezing weather in Falworth, Wisconsin, it’s therapy just to know that other places on the planet exist. I’d planned an imaginary trip to every place I’d ever seen on that show.

I got up to go to the bathroom, and when I returned, Sean had flipped to *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives*. He passed me the bowl of potatoes, which I handed back for the first time. “I can’t watch a food show and eat food. It’s a weird quirk.” I sighed as Guy Fieri took a Mustang-sized bite of a cheeseburger and mugged at the camera. “Really trying not to hate the Mayor of Flavortown right now.”

Sean put the bowl he'd scraped clean on the coffee table. "Did you watch the episode where he visited that falafel place in Milwaukee?"

I shrugged. Probably?

"It's owned by a cousin of one of my high school friends. Apparently, it was about to close, but then Triple D came, and after the show aired, so many people, food tourists, went to eat there that it turned everything around and now they've opened two more locations. One is in Kenosha—we should go sometime and try it." He paused. "What is falafel anyway?"

I reached for the bottle of wine again, but it was empty. God, how did one even explain falafel?

"Um, it's—"

Wait a minute. Wait. One. Minute.

I blinked a few times. Fragments of something were running through my mind, but they were Chardonnay-coated and slippery.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Eternally popular source of entertainment.

Planned a trip to every place I'd ever seen on that show.

After the show aired, so many people came that it turned things around.

Web series.

“Ohhhhh.” I breathed a long high-pitched note.

Sean eyed me strangely. “You OK, J?”

“I have an idea. A really bad idea.”

\*

I concluded the brief, fumbling presentation to the group and raised my eyebrows, waiting for feedback. In the corner of the diner, Sean gave me an unconvincing thumbs-up. While I was generally pretty patient and good at explaining things—you had to be patient to explain wireless internet routers to eighty-five-year-old women, which was something I did regularly—but this idea was a pretty wild stretch for the members of the Falworth Small Business Association. Especially at eight a.m. on Black Friday, pre-coffee.

I did a scan of the faces in the room:

Diane and Michael looked a little intrigued and a little puzzled.

Jim's forehead frown lines were so deep he looked like a confused cartoon character.

Carol's weathered face was placid. Had she heard anything I'd said? I'd shown a few clips from some of the most popular web series on the internet so everyone could grasp the concept, but...

"What do you guys think?" I demanded.

Carol leaned back in her chair. "Let me get this straight. You want us to create a—" she made finger quotes "—"reality TV holiday dating show' that we will—" more finger quotes "—"stream on the internet as a web series' to promote the town and attract tourists?"

"Yes," I exclaimed. Didn't quite appreciate the emphatic finger quotes, but I had to admit that I was impressed that she grasped it so quickly. She'd practically made me cry from frustration when I'd installed the diner's point-of-sale system a few years back.

"Explain how the dating part would go," Diane said, flinging the end of her purple silk scarf over her shoulder. "I've seen lots of different ones on TV. How would ours work?"

Ours. That was a good sign.

"So, I'm thinking we get like ten or fifteen people from the town to sign up," I said quickly. "Hopefully, a couple of bunches in different age-appropriate brackets. We'll film them going on dates that highlight things in our town: the pub, the bakery, the bowling alley, the diner, Greta's shop."

My head was spinning; we had to kick this off now to have any impact on the holiday season. "Reality TV shows, like American Idol, do really well with audience

participation, so I'm thinking we get viewers to vote on how people partner up for dates. That gets the audience invested and interacting on social media, and that's how we'll raise awareness."

Jim raised his hand. "I don't get it."

I stifled a sigh. "OK. Let's pretend that you all sign up to be a contestant." Jim and Michael looked horrified, while Carol and Diane looked delighted.

"I could be a viewer at home," I explained, crouching over my laptop and miming interest at the screen. "I think to myself: I want to see Diane and Michael go on a date, so I vote for that."

Diane giggled, apparently thrilled with the idea of stepping out on the town with a man twenty-five years her junior. I did not look at Michael's reaction.

"Maybe Sean's a viewer also," I went on. "He votes for Carol and Jim going on a date." Never mind that Carol had been happily married for forty years.

She beamed at Jim across the room. "Bring a corsage when you pick me up, darling." Jim rolled his eyes but tipped her an imaginary hat.

"We would tally the votes, and the contestants would have to go on filmed dates—to our places of business—and hopefully people will watch. Lots of them. And think: I want to go there and meet these crazy small-town daters and hang out where they're hanging out."

The room fell silent again. "It's a long shot, I do realize. But what do we have to lose? I can organize it and try to find contestants," I offered. "Sean has offered to be our cameraman."

Michael looked doubtful. “What if...” He cleared his throat tactfully. “What if people don’t come across well? Like, what if our contestants act poorly or in a way that doesn’t represent the town well?”

My face broke in a wide smile, and I prayed it wasn’t too nasty. That’s exactly what we should hope for, Michael. “We’re not trying to win an award for behavior. We’re trying to save the town.” Maybe that was a little dramatic, but who cared? “We want clicks, we want exposure, we want feet and butts in this town. If people get interested because someone acts like a jackass, that’s totally fine.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Diane snapped her fingers. “I have the perfect name for a dating show with a holiday twist: Single Bells.”

My mouth fell open. “That’s amazing!”

“We should do this!” she announced. “At this point, what can it hurt?”

Nice. If Diane was firmly in, it was unlikely that the others would reject the idea.

If only...

I sighed and said the thing that had kept circling in my head overnight. “I really wish we had the Christmas Village, though. It would be the perfect place to film, and if tourists do come, at least they’d have a central place to go.” But the lack of the Christmas Village wasn’t something I could fix.

Carol stood up. “I have some news on that front. Exciting news!” She winked at me. “I thought I was going to have the big reveal today, but between Jane’s idea and my news, the rest of you are getting a one-two punch.”

She took a deep breath. “I found a donor. Someone to contribute the full amount of money needed to build the Christmas Village. And not just like it’s been the last few years. To build it back to the level it was at fifteen years ago: the ice rink, the carnival games, a space for live music, the big central tree, the food and drink stalls—everything!”

The group gasped in unison. “Really?” Jim sputtered. “How can that even be done in

time?”

“Money talks,” Carol said cheerfully. “Loudly. The donor has arranged for construction to begin today, and most of the build can be done by December 3. I’ve already called all of my contacts, looking for vendors to fill the stalls. I’ve called the highschool, asking for teenagers to work.” She clasped her hands together, eyes shining. “Sal over at the tree lot has found the best tree! It’s twenty-five feet tall.”

She beamed at me. “Might that not be a fun date for your contestants, Jane? To decorate the tree at the center of the square?”

I pictured it. Daters flirting or bickering as they strung lights and hung ornaments. Oh yeah. Super great. Just like a Hallmark Christmas movie. Except...

“Do we even need to do the dating show web series thing now if we have the Christmas Village?” Michael voiced what I was thinking.

“I think we do,” Carol said firmly. “The Christmas Village will be great, but we’ve already missed the long Thanksgiving weekend for tourists, and we’ve had no marketing or PR yet. What good is a gorgeous Christmas Village if we don’t have anyone come to spend money?”

Diane got to her feet, looking positively weepy. “This is wonderful! Wednesday we had no ideas and no hope. Today we have a two-pronged attack to save everything.”

Carol grabbed a notebook and pen. “We have no time to spare. I need help with the Christmas Village. Jim, Diane, Michael—let’s get to work.” She looked up at me. “You and Sean start finding people for the web series and outlining a schedule.” She squinted at a clock on the wall. “Let’s meet back here at four to discuss progress.”

Jim raised his hand again. “Carol, wait. Who is this big donor? How did this

happen?”

She simply smiled, a tinselled Cheshire cat. “You’ll find out at four!”

### Chapter Three

Two days before she passed, I’d brought Greta her morning coffee from Carol’s, our typical routine. But she wasn’t sitting on the sofa as usual, waiting for me to discuss which shop shifts I’d cover or what groceries she needed or chortling over a juicy bit of gossip from her group of lifelong friends.

Instead, she sat at the kitchen table with a purposeful set to her shoulders. Just the sight of her there was enough for my mouth to go dry. We had a history at that kitchen table, Greta and me. The hard conversations happened there.

“What’s wrong?” I said immediately, squeezing the coffee cups so hard that liquid threatened to spill from the plastic-covered tops.

“Nothing,” she said implacably. “I just wanted to have a little chat with you about your future.”

“My future?” Blinking, I plopped down across from her and handed over her half-decaf with cream.

“Time is passing, Jane,” she said. One of the things I loved about Greta was that she was always blunt. Few people manage to intertwine kindness with unwavering directness, but that was one of her gifts. “I’m worried you’re going to wake up one day and realize it’s passed you by. It’s time for you to make a plan.”

Now, of course, I realized that Greta knew her health was declining much more rapidly than expected. This “little chat” had been her way of propelling me to a life

without her.

But in the moment, I felt a flare of temper in my gut. How, exactly, was I supposed to be planning for a better future when almost every minute of every day was spoken for by work or by caring for her?

I didn't say anything aloud, but she knew me so well. She read my exasperation in the angle of my jaw on my next sip of coffee. "Don't get defensive," she said gently. "I just want you to have a life that you're proud of. I want more for you."

My jaw relaxed. "Oh yeah? Like what?"

She lifted her hand and began counting off on her fingers. "Work that's more meaningful to you than a paycheck. A community of friends or a place you're happy to be." She wagged her eyebrows. "A relationship with a nice man, perhaps."



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

I let out a long sigh and stood up. Greta had never been the meddling type before, but maybe she was getting bored with her usual projects. “Let’s make the shopping list.”

Her face fell slightly, so I forced a laugh and an accepting nod. “We can talk about my life improvement plan when I bring over the groceries tomorrow,” I promised.

“I’m holding you to that, Jane,” she warned.

The follow-up chat never happened though. Greta went into the hospital the following day and never came out.

In the weeks after her passing, I thought about this conversation almost hourly. Because the fact was, after Greta passed, I had a lot more time. Greta had been right to nudge me. My life needed big changes. It was time for me to stop floundering around, to take charge of my own destiny, as cheesy as that sounded.

And, hell, the framework Greta provided seemed like a very solid springboard:

- (1) Work that’s more meaningful than just a paycheck
- (2) A community of friends or a place you’re happy to be
- (3) A relationship with a nice man

True, running Greta’s shop wasn’t exactly my dream job—but carrying on her legacy was definitely more meaningful than just a paycheck.

And I probably would be happier if I settled into the Falworth community instead of constantly feeling stifled and rolling my eyes and battling futilely against small-town life. Oddly, Single Bell was going to be a huge opportunity for me. Creating the web series and working to save the town's small businesses would certainly go a long way toward establishing myself in the community.

Despite my wide independent streak, I was open to a relationship, open to sharing my life with someone. My intent with Michael may have been a bit ambiguous so far, but I was ready for my signals to get a lot clearer; next time, instead of coffee, I'd ask him out for dinner.

I'd promised Greta I'd improve my life—and I would do it. The plan was in full swing.

\*

Man, what a day. The busiest Black Friday I could remember, that's for sure.

First, Sean and I went to the Best Buy in Vienna and fought through deal-crazed shoppers to sweet-talk the manager into letting us borrow a bunch of film equipment. It wasn't easy; I had to promise to take the worst Geek Squad house calls for the entire month. But at least now we weren't going to be doing a web series using nothing but iPhone cameras.

I sent Sean home to look after Bruce and to watch video tutorials on how to use the cameras, lighting equipment, and editing software. In high school, he'd been part of the club that filmed area sporting events and stage musicals, so he wasn't coming in cold. But this was going to be a much more nimble kind of shooting. He'd need to move fast. I'd help him edit the footage, but he quickly needed to get the basics of everything else down pat.

Now, the hard part: finding contestants. It wasn't like I had a huge pool of willing people who made sense. I had a tiny town's worth and I needed to find singles in different age groups.

I drove my car in an aimless loop through the town center, trying to get ideas. Carol hadn't been kidding. There were at least a dozen workers in the square right now. Some were building the ice rink partition, while others constructed the vendor booths and stalls for carnival games. I wasn't the only one gawking either. A lot of cars and trucks were circling the chaos, dozens of locals wondering what the hell was going on. By dinnertime tonight, word would have spread: Falworth Christmas was back.

I needed a place to work, but I didn't want to head to the diner quite yet. Through the windows, I could see Carol pacing, waving her arms, talking on the phone. Michael sat in a booth, phone stuck to his ear as well, paperwork on every square inch of the table in front of him. The two waitresses were running around the rest of the place, filling coffees and taking orders. Almost every table was full. No doubt the place would be busy all day as people wandered in, looking for gossip about the construction.

I parked and went into Jim's pub, which was completely empty. No one was even bartending, which meant that Carol had taken over Jim's day too. He was probably back in the office ordering kegs for the Christmas Village and figuring out how to get around any town ordinances that would theoretically prevent those beer sales.

I plopped on a barstool, pulled out my laptop, and got straight to work. I didn't even take off my leather jacket.

I knew all the popular local Facebook groups, and I spent a solid hour crafting a post to intrigue local singles looking for love and fame. Then I sent out emails to people I knew better, explaining the concept and the reasoning. "I realize this is a weird way to help our struggling small businesses, but Falworth is a weird place" was how I signed

off.

Not exactly eloquent. I rubbed my eyes and peered over the bar in case Jim had magically appeared to get me a Diet Coke.

“I don’t think there’s anyone working.”

I was so surprised at the sound of a man’s voice just a few feet away that I jumped on my stool and slammed my knees into the bar. “Jesus!” I barked, whipping my head around.

He sat four stools down, scrolling through his phone. “Sorry.” He did not sound sorry in the slightest. “I assumed you heard me when I came in and sat down.”

The stranger had a British accent, dark hair, funky glasses, and wore both an expensive cashmere sweater and a bored expression. He couldn’t have looked less local if he’d tattooed I’m from away on his forehead. “Do you know the Wi-Fi password, by any chance?”

Of course I did; I’d installed it. “Nope.”

OK, that was unnecessary. Don’t piss off the tourists, Jane. Jim’s pub couldn’t handle a one-star Yelp review from some asshole.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

He threw up his hands. “No sign posted with the Wi-Fi info. Nobody pouring drinks.” He let out an exasperated huff. “No wonder this place is a dying shithole, right? The bar, the whole town.”

Strong words, stranger. Maybe I agreed, but I was allowed to think so because I lived here. He, however, could take his opinion and shove it straight up his ass.

The need for caffeine was real. I stood, put my palms on the bar, and boosted myself over it. Under the bar, Jim’s personal mini fridge had only one can of soda left. I made a mental note to replace it for him before the end of the day.

The stranger put his phone on the bar with an angry slap. “Are you kidding? Are you the bartender? You’ve just been sitting there ignoring me the whole time I’ve been here?”

I almost wanted to say yes. Because that haughty, entitled tone in his prettily accented voice made his face a prime candidate for a fist.

“I don’t work here,” I said flatly, although I did pick up shifts in the summers sometimes. “I just know the owner.”

The stranger cocked his head and considered me. Changed tactics. “Do you know him well enough to grab me a beer?” He smiled, and it changed his whole damn face. He went from haughty and bored to...zing! There was a teasing tone in his wry voice now, complimented by curved lips and a flash of white teeth. A knowing, flirtatious glint in his dark eyes.

Hmm. This was a person used to getting everything he wanted.

Too bad for him that I hated people like that.

Maybe I didn't want a soda after all. Maybe I wanted something else. I slowly took a pint glass from the shelf and pulled a draft of Spotted Cow, all while making extreme eye contact with the stranger's amused gaze.

But instead of sliding the beer over the bar, I walked around it, grabbed my laptop, and strolled slowly to Jim's back office, enjoying an enormous gulp of the beer on my walk. I ignored his what the hell and called over my shoulder, "Enjoy your stay in our shithole town."

\*

At four, Carol shooed out her remaining customers and shut the door to everyone but the Small Business Association. I grabbed a fresh pot of coffee off the burner and filled everyone's mugs. We were a tired and wired group this afternoon. Lots of manic energy and bloodshot eyes.

Diane took a grateful sip of the fresh coffee and smoothed one of many scarves. "Status check?"

Carol glanced out the window. Sounds of banging and buzzing could be heard clearly through the windows, and the smell of sawdust and oil was in the air. "I just spoke to the foreman. We're actually ahead of schedule. The ice rink construction is almost done; they'll be spraying the top layer tomorrow. If the weather stays as forecasted through the weekend, the Christmas Village will be built by end of day on Monday. Vendors and workers can report in on Tuesday, and we'll open Wednesday."

"Excellent!" Diane exclaimed. "Michael, what do you have?"

He shuffled some papers on the table. “Lots of eager participants. We’ll have five booths of craftspeople selling Christmas ornaments, stockings, and other handmade gifts.” He held up some stapled packets. “Tomorrow I’ll hand-deliver these agreements on space rental and profit splitting.”

Diane opened her mouth, looking like she was going to congratulate him, but Jim interrupted first, swiping a hand through his messy hair.

“Food and drink stalls will be ready for Wednesday night. There’ll be a stall with burgers and brats. One with cheese curds. The hot cocoa and Christmas cookies, obviously. I even got the guys who do the raclette sandwiches!” Oh man. My stomach growled audibly. “Kegs are ordered and...” he cleared his throat delicately “...permits have been applied for and backdated and approved.”

“Things are really coming together!” Carol said. “I spoke to the town and arranged special garbage pickup at the Village every day until January 2.” We all cooed appreciatively; that could not have been easy. “You think that was hard?” She scoffed. “Try finding a Santa Claus this time of year! I finally found one, but his hours are going to be unpredictable. He can’t sit there all month.”

She whipped out a notepad that had been empty this morning. She was now writing on a page close to the end. “I’ve got his wacky schedule here. We’ll need to publish it in the paper.” She snapped her gaze to me. “Oh, Jane! We’ll need you to create a website for the Village, of course—its hours, what will be offered, that kind of thing.”

I yawned so wide my jaw cracked. But she was right, and it wouldn’t take me all that long to stand up. “OK. Send me everything you’ve got about everything.” I spoke through another yawn. “I’ll get it done tonight.” Sean was watching the shop for me right now. I’d take over when we were done here and as I didn’t expect many customers, I’d have the time.

We talked through various logistics for another twenty minutes, and my respect for every person in the group grew by leaps and bounds. I saw them every single day and I'd never have expected them to be able to hustle like this.

Which sat uncomfortably in my stomach like a hot coal. Why had I been so eye-rollingly judgmental? They were just older versions of me, after all. Townies with well-developed survival skills.

“What have you got on the dating show front, Jane?” Carol finally asked. “Did you have good luck finding some contestants?”

Meh. “I have five contestants signed up so far.” I smiled and pointed at Diane. “One in this room.”

Carol and Michael burst into applause. “Wonderful!”

Diane curtsied. “Well, I’ve always wanted to act.”

I bit my lip, wondering if I needed to explain the concept of reality TV again. Hell, though, Diane probably understood it better than me. Most reality TV show people were likely acting.

I knew that the real reason she'd opted to participate was that she was widely respected and liked within the community. Her commitment to it would show others that it was an OK thing to do.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Besides our one esteemed participant, who else signed up?” Michael asked, eyes wide with curiosity.

He really was so cute. And so nice. He’d sent me a text earlier today to let me know that his sister was coming to town in a few weeks and suggested that the three of us go out for a celebratory drink. That was a good sign. Maybe all of this holiday craziness would bring us even closer together. It was definitely time for me to make a long-overdue move.

“Two,” Jim mumbled.

We all turned to face him. Two? “You didn’t reach out to me today,” I said slowly. Um, he was married. I was all for scandalous, but I didn’t want icky.

The rest of the group frowned at him as well. Diane lifted her cell phone as though she had Jim’s wife on speed dial.

“Both Nicole and I will do it,” he forced out, his forehead going shiny with sweat. “You guys all know we’re separated. We work alternate shifts at the pub, so we’re never together. I’ve been sleeping at my brother’s for a month. When I told her about the Christmas Village and the dating show, Nicole said we should both sign up. She said it’s something we can do to help the town and to help us move on.”

The room was silent for a moment. The situation was truly bizarre, but from a reality TV show perspective it totally worked! Voters would be intrigued by a separated married couple. Would they vote for them to go on dates together or with other people? Also, Jim and Nicole were in their late thirties—a great crossover age to date

both younger and older.

“OK!” I said finally, breaking the silence. “I’ll add you both to my list.”

I pulled up a few files on my laptop. “I have three other volunteers. The first is Mabel Hastings.”

“I know her!” Diane exclaimed. “She’s the librarian at the high school.” Indeed she was, an attractive forty-something brunette with a tiny voice.

I smiled at the picture on my screen of the next one. “Tripp Waring.”

Jim groaned so loud I bet he felt the vibration in his toes. “Tripp? Are you serious? That idiot?”

Yup. Ahotidiot. The staple of any reality TV show. Twenty-five-year-old Tripp had dated just about every woman under forty in town. He was not interested in love, he was interested in social media exposure. Which was absolutely fine. He’d act like a good-looking moron on camera, which is what we needed.

Now, would my last contestant be a surprise? I glanced at Carol. “Brian signed up.”

She blinked at me. Oh yeah, I’d floored her. “My Brian? My son?”

“Yeah.” I’d been almost as surprised when he’d contacted me on Facebook. Brian was in his early forties. He’d divorced a few years ago, and his wife had moved away. He was a man of few words who loved the outdoors way more than people. He spent every free minute fishing on the lake. I was worried about him as a reality TV show participant because he grunted more than formed actual words. But beggars couldn’t be choosers, and Brian did have a great rugged man look with his year-round tan and thick beard.

“Huh.” Carol looked down at her notepad again and shook it off. “So, by my count you have three women and three men. That’s pretty good, right?”

Yes and no. Five couples would have been ideal for the schedule I put together and the hours of content we’d need to fill. After calculating the average time of a date and how much interesting footage could likely be culled from it against the hours of footage we wanted to post over the next month and the different places to highlight in town, I’d figured that five couples was our sweet spot. But oh well.

With the three we had, there were a few different pairings voters could play with. There was some intrigue, given Jim and Nicole’s marital situation. And the hot idiot, of course.

“From a successful reality TV show perspective, we have potential,” I said. “But we also have a problem. Reality TV shows are about archetypes, or at least the best ones are. There needs to be humor and drama to keep people watching. Both humor and drama are driven by certain people: the hero/heroines and villains. We don’t have either.”

Jim looked offended. Did he prefer to be the hero or the villain?

“I think it’ll be OK,” I said, unconvincingly. It’s not like I had any other volunteers, and we needed to get this show on the road ASAP. I’d arranged a dating schedule that started next week. We’d launch the voting website this weekend, do a little initial online marketing to get votes for the first matches, and then all couples would be required to do an almost-immediate date that included one local business and a stop at the Christmas Village. I wanted the first date footage posted by next Thursday night, less than a week away.

I looked at my slate of contestants again. What we really needed was a woman for viewers to root for. Someone who would look beautiful on camera and win over the

hearts of the audience. We didn't have that.

Diane was kind of magnetic, that was true, but she was a little old to satisfy internet trolls—and she had no likely pairing in the group. Both Mabel and Nicole were nice enough, but they weren't going to own the camera. I'd be surprised if they didn't actually hide from the filming. Mabel was so quiet that being a librarian was almost a cliché. Nicole was more rough around the edges—she had to be to own a pub in a blue-collar town. Viewers would like her bluntness, but I wasn't sure she'd capture their hearts.

If the series was at all successful, Tripp would gain new Insta followers and a lot of DMs to his accounts. But just as many viewers would roll their eyes at him and root for him to fail.

No heroes, no villains. Oh well. This is what we had for Single Bells, and this is what we'd film.

Carol stood and moved for the door, clearing her throat and walking in a sweeping style that drew everyone's eyes. "I think I can help with one of those archetypes, Jane. It's time for you guys to meet our mysterious donor who contributed the money to our Christmas Village. The person who may have saved all of our businesses!"

She put her hand on the doorknob, and I frowned and sat up straighter. The donor was actually here? I'd thought Carol was just going to make an announcement about some sort of local corporation or an eccentric millionaire who owned one of the huge lakeside mansions.

She pulled open the door, and a man walked in abruptly, almost jostling her as he stepped into the room. Oh no. Oh no, no, no. I recognized the dark hair and haughty jaw immediately. The stranger from Jim's pub. The one I'd been rude to—was he our mysterious donor?

Way to get off on the wrong foot, Jane. So typical. I sighed, prepared to smile and apologize.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Oh...but no. Carol was looking at him with a crinkled brow and the suspicious set of her lips reserved for strangers who were clearly not tourists. He wasn't who she was expecting to be at the door.

The stranger saw us gaping at him and offered a winning smile. To Carol, he pointed out the door. "She's right there."

Carol looked outside and this time she beamed, first toward the late arriver and then back at us. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I please introduce you to this year's builder of the Christmas Village, a most beloved and successful daughter of this town, the only two-time winner in the history of the county's Christmas Princess pageant—"

Oh. Fuck.

My skin went cold from head to toe. My breath caught in my chest, and the cup of coffee I'd just thrown back became lava in my stomach. Please no.

Next to me, Michael scrambled out of his booth and stood on the balls of his feet, hands clutching into fists at his sides.

Carol spun us all toward the inevitable conclusion of this sudden nightmare. "And last but not least, treasured granddaughter of our recently departed Greta. Please welcome and thank our own darling...Bella Bradley!"

And there she was. Standing tall in the entryway, blushing and beautiful, as always. A lot of people around here peak in high school, but Bella was clearly still ascending to a peak the rest of us couldn't even see. Her thick blond hair still fell in long waves,

and her clear skin was glowing. Behind her shy smile, her teeth were white and even. She wore a light blue peacoat that highlighted her coloring, and she had a pair of glasses pushed high on her head, holding her hair back like a headband.

“Hi, everyone,” she said softly.

There was a moment of silence as everyone blinked at her dazzling arrival, the way you’d blink at a gentle sun rising after a long, freezing night of despair.

Then everyone except Michael and me swarmed on her like locusts, burying her in hugs and kisses and general shouts of joy.

How long had it been since Bella deigned to come home? Greta had specifically asked for no funeral to be held, so Bella hadn’t come home for any sort of service. Since the lawyer hadn’t settled the estate yet, there’d been no need for her to sign papers or assume ownership of property. Oh, who was I kidding? I knew exactly how long it had been since she’d spent any significant time in Falworth—more than a dozen years.

Next to me, Michael twitched as though he didn’t know whether to join the hugging crowd or stay back here out of the fray. For such a normally relaxed and easygoing guy, right now he was strung tight. His grip on the chair in front of him was white.

I wasn’t the only one Bella had abandoned all those years ago.

Carol didn’t let us miss out on the reunion joy, however. After a few minutes, she grabbed Bella out of the crowd and pulled her over to us. The dark-haired stranger followed.

“Now, Bella, these two you know very well, of course.” Carol looked at our faces expectantly, as though we’d dive into a weepy pile of happy tears. Which was stupid.

She'd been Greta's best friend. She had to know that Bella and I hadn't spoken in more than a decade. Although Greta visited Bella in Chicago often and the two of them traveled together every holiday, I hadn't laid eyes on Bella since we were teenagers.

Michael extended both of his hands clumsily. "Bella. Wow. Welcome back." Such a gracious gentleman.

She grabbed his hands and stared back him. "Michael." I still knew every note and nuance of Bella's voice; it was threaded with nerves.

They continued their weird hand grasp and staring contest for almost thirty seconds. What in the actual hell? Was Michael kidding me? Were they having some sort of weird romantic moment?

The dark-haired stranger behind Bella looked just as annoyed as I was. If Bella had brought a big-city boyfriend home for a holiday visit, he should look infuriated at his woman gazing adoringly into the face of her smitten high school boyfriend. I wanted to stamp my foot on the ground. Of course Bella showed up with a hot Brit just following her around.

Finally, Carol emitted a giggle, and Michael and Bella dropped hands, both flushing. It was so cringingly adorable, I wanted to barf. Had to appreciate the sardonic eye roll of the dark-haired stranger. Lucky for Bella, he didn't seem to be the jealous type.

Then Bella was in front of me, silently blinking. Carol drew in an audible breath and held it.

I raised an eyebrow. "Hell's Bells," I intoned sarcastically, invoking a much-hated nickname only I'd called her when we were teenagers.



Her eyes narrowed. “J-Bird,” she coolly returned the favor.

Carol drew both hands to her heart and made a little crooning sound, as though we’d fallen into one another’s arms and were hugging with joy instead of glaring at each other. “Isn’t this wonderful? The two of you back together and working to help our town. Wherever she is right now, Greta is thrilled.”

Both Bella and I looked at the floor. If there was one—one—thing we could agree on, it was that we never wanted to disappoint Greta. She’d been the most important person in our lives.

“Even better news, Jane,” Carol peeped. “Since Bella is going to be in town for the entire month of December, I’ve convinced her to be a contestant on Single Bells. She’ll be the heroine everyone will root for! Can you imagine how perfect?”

WTF? No! I did not want to spend the next month arranging dates for Bella and editing video of her and watching her captivate everyone with her constant sweetness.

But Jesus, Carol did have a point. Bella was extremely photogenic and telegenic, and as a character, she was gold. Falworth’s long-lost sweetheart-turned-big city successful career woman returning to her small-town roots to save Christmas?

Wasn’t that the starting premise to ninety percent of the Christmas movies on TV?

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Carol adapted her scheming tone, terribly disguised by a thoughtful tilt to her voice. “The only problem is that now we have an uneven number of women and men for the show, so it’ll be a little more complicated to arrange the same number of dates every week.”

Not ideal, but we could work around that. Which I was about to say when Michael blurted, “I’ll just sign up, too, then.”

Bits of rage began to form in my brain and rain down the insides of my body, like ash from a brewing volcano. Freakin’ perfect. I’d just made up my mind to finally pursue Michael—the best guy in town, hands down—and then Bella waltzed in here, blinked her big blue eyes at him, and he was immediately hers again?

The dark-haired stranger frowned deeper now. “Bella, if you’re involved in this web series thing while we’re here, we’re not going to have much time to—”

Bella cringed, looking guilty. Did she seriously forget she’d brought a dude home with her? Someone who may not like her going on videoed dates with old boyfriends?

“Easy solution!” Carol crowed, looking him up and down critically. “If you need extra time with Bella while you’re here, you should sign up for the series too!” Ignoring the way Michael stiffened, Carol glanced at me excitedly. “Right, Jane? Viewers may easily pair them together for dates.”

I smiled. Now this was a little better. Drove me nuts that Bella was back in town for five minutes and had two of the best-looking men in a hundred miles already vying

for her time. But a love triangle! That was the bread and butter of reality TV.

I wanted to hold up my fingers to make a frame around the three of them right now: Bella in her light blue coat and gorgeous blond hair. On her left, the hometown honey: tall, broad-shouldered Michael, with dark golden hair and wearing flannel and fleece. Even still frozen, he looked stalwart and loyal and kind. On her right, the big-city boyfriend: somewhat shorter and less broad than Michael, but slim and fit with an honestly great face, laughing dark eyes, and a wicked mouth. And a British accent never hurt anything. If Michael's stance was stalwart, the stranger's was vibrant. He didn't look like he'd stay still for long. He looked ready to burst with movement and slyness.

He sighed. "Fine, whatever, sign me up." Hmmm, easy sell. Either he was extremely confident that he'd prevail with Bella's affections or I'd misunderstood their relationship.

I settled myself back at the table with my laptop and started to enter our three new contestants into the schedule. Tried to ignore the resentment ignited by those falling bits of rage-ash inside me. Creating the web series to help the town had been my idea, my contribution. Yet Bella—who hadn't even visited in more than ten years—outshone me as always.

Not only had she given money for the Village, she was now going to be the star of the series. A beautiful woman with two men in competition for her. No doubt, it would be great for the show. We'd kick off the series with brief character profiles and do confessionals to the camera, where the daters could talk alone about how the date went. I knew Bella well enough to know she'd hate discussing dates to anonymous strangers, and she'd loathe being in a love triangle, but her agony about it would be great to watch. Viewers trained on Christmas movies and reality TV shows would eat this up. I almost giggled—her name was Bella, after all. Too bad we couldn't rename the men to be Edward and Jacob.

Which reminded me. “What’s your name?” I asked the stranger, fingers on the keyboard.

“Nathaniel Wright.” He flicked his eyes from his phone to my face. “Nate.”

I held eye contact with him. Did he even remember our exchange in the pub a few hours ago? If he’d been wandering in and out of places, meeting people all day with Bella, I probably didn’t make an impression. I certainly didn’t stand out from other folks around here. There were lots of short, makeup-free women in sweatshirts and jeans, with dark hair in messy ponytails.

“Jane.”

His lips curved in a quick smile highlighting the contrast between his white teeth and dark hair. “What did Bella call you? J-Bird? Is that what I should call you?”

My polite smile turned into a snarl. “Only if you want to get punched in the face.”

A loud truck pulled up in front of the diner, and Carol screeched. “The tree! They’re here to stand up the tree! Look, everyone!”

She opened the door and dashed outside, quickly followed by Diane and Jim. Bella, Michael, and Nate filed out after, and all of them stood on the sidewalk, watching as the huge fir was unloaded and carried to the center of the square. Diane burst into an off-key rendition of “Oh, Christmas Tree,” and Carol joined in while the others laughed.

It was so silly and so stinkin’ sweet that it almost made my eyes water.

It was a random moment of joy in a town that didn’t get a lot of those.

I should have been right in the middle of that group, rolling my eyes in spite of the enjoyment, humming the tune to keep Diane on key, too cold in my thin coat.

But I wasn't. I was sitting here by myself just watching them while they sang and laughed and gathered Bella to them in a grateful embrace. Bella was their sweet beauty, their pride. Bella was saving the town, not me.

I turned my head from the impromptu celebration and plopped back down at my computer, wiping an angry tear from the corner of my eye. I looked at the dating schedule and let out a huff. Now that Nate had signed up, too, we were back at an uneven number. So aside from creating the website tonight, I'd also have to redo the entire dang schedule.

Outside, the group burst into laughter again when no one could remember the second verse of the carol. Through the window, I could see them all clearly. Bella had not one buttwoman currently smiling down at her face. No matter that I'd finally decided to go after Michael myself or that she'd be leaving town again as soon as the holiday was over.

Bella had always gotten what she wanted. Always.

Why did life have to be so damn easy for her? And why was I helping life be so easy for her right now?

I looked at the web series dating schedule again, and an evil thought skittered through my mind. What had I said earlier? Reality shows are about archetypes...the hero/heroines and villains.

An unfamiliar smile formed on my face as I typed my own name into the final slot on the web series dating sign-up list. So Bella was our heroine? Fine.

I'd be the villain.

### Chapter Four

Early on Monday morning, I perched on the stool in front of the backdrop we'd constructed in one corner of Jim's pub and waited as Sean fidgeted with the lighting. "Let's get this over with," I grumbled. I was the last of our contestants to film a video introduction of myself for the web series. Sean had done everyone else's over the weekend, and I'd been up until two a.m. last night helping him edit the footage.

The website for the Christmas Village was live, and I'd spent way too much time tweaking the search engine optimization. But whenever someone searched for any Christmassy event in Wisconsin, I wanted them to find us. I'd spent two dismal hours yesterday poring over the books for Greta's shop, fruitlessly hoping I'd misunderstood the math before—but nope. I made a mental note to spruce up the shop with Christmas lights and ornaments before I opened tomorrow. I was going to plug it like hell every time I was being filmed and make damn sure our contestants wandered through to browse on their silly dates.

"Ready!" Sean called, and I straightened on the stool and showed my teeth in the smile I greeted customers with when tending bar. Sean counted down so I knew when to start talking.

"I'm Jane Zielinski," I started. "I've lived in Falworth my whole life."

In my head, I flicked through the list of prompts we'd given all contestants to help them craft their intro: name, light personal background, what you do for a living, how you'd summarize your personality, likes and dislikes, why you're participating in the web series.

It'd been extremely interesting to watch the other contestants' footage. I was surprised by something from just about everyone. Either I didn't know some of these people as well as I thought or they were making shit up. Jim's estranged wife, Nicole, for example, said she loved to travel. I knew for a fact that Jim and Nicole hadn't left Wisconsin in five years. Of course, maybe they couldn't afford it. Or maybe Jim hated to travel and that's why they never went anywhere.

Between brief fishing anecdotes, Brian had mumbled that he enjoyed writing in his spare time. Mabel, the librarian, said that one of her hobbies was rebuilding motorcycles. Diane boasted that she owned three local businesses, and I had no idea what she owned besides the bakery and thrift store.

Of course, there were other very non-surprising moments as well. Tripp had paused in the middle of a monologue about his athletic prowess to ask, "Are we getting, like, any money for doing this? Like, endorsements or something?"

Nate, Bella's city man, had grinned disarmingly as soon as Sean had given him the prompt and said, "I have no idea what I'm doing in this web series. I was in town for five minutes before signing up. But sometimes that's life, you know? You've just got to go along for the ride." The minute Sean signaled that he'd gotten what he needed, the freewheeling grin dropped right off his face and he went back to working on his phone. Disingenuous or efficient? A charming jerk? Very unlike Bella's usual type.

Not that I knew anything about Bella anymore.

Her video introduction had been frustratingly perfect, of course. She looked gorgeous in an angelic, nonthreatening way. She still favored big light-colored sweaters and jeans, which always looked both comfy and chic on her tall, slim frame. She spoke of herself in a self-deprecating manner as "a computer nerd," which was true. She'd gone to college on an engineering scholarship, and Greta constantly bragged about her fancy consulting job after graduation and the software project she'd been working on



independently for the last couple of years.

To the prompt about why she was doing the web series, she'd paused thoughtfully. "I've been away from home a long time. There's nothing more I want this Christmas season than to reconnect with my community." A light, tinkling laugh. "If that involves romance, so be it!"

So yeah. Adorable. Sweet. After all these years, still the perfect Christmas Princess. Truly heroine-esque.

"How would you describe your personality?" Sean prompted me in an uninflected dronelike manner. Luckily, we cut all that stuff out.

I smoothed my hands down over my black T-shirt. Cocked my head as if I hadn't planned exactly what I was going to say. "I guess you could call me a work-hard, play-hard kind of girl."

Sean looked up from the camera and frowned at me. "I've never seen you play at all," he said, narrowing his eyes. "Or wear makeup. I didn't even know you had such long hair until today!"

I rolled my eyes—eyes fully lined with black eyeliner and a heavy coat of mascara—at him. Plain Jane could never compete with Beautiful Bella in the looks department, but I could contrast with her. She was tall and blond. I was short with almost black hair. She looked like a girl who modeled for Neutrogena moisturizer ads. With my smudged eyes and tight black jeans, I was more "bad girl" than a beauty.

That's the thing though. Sometimes the bad girl won, especially in reality TV.

I flicked my hand at Sean to keep going. "It's just a...persona," I assured him. "I'm

only doing this to even out the numbers,” I lied. “I don’t want to actually be myself in this thing. I want to keep the real me private.” That part was true.

When we finished and I’d edited myself to my satisfaction, I sat back down and exchanged a few texts with Carol. The kick-off grand opening to the Christmas Village was going to be on Wednesday night. A public event to decorate the huge tree in the center of the square. Carol was frantically doing PR—everything from putting flyers at all hotels in a six-town radius to calling and begging everyone we knew to show up on Wednesday. Aside from wanting people to come and spend money, we also needed the Christmas Village to look busy with people enjoying themselves as background for the first set of dates.

“When are you posting the first poll?” Sean asked.

“Today,” I said firmly. Once my intro was up, I’d make the corresponding website live. We’d link to it from the town’s pitiful social media presence and beg everyone we knew to share and vote. We didn’t expect many votes for the first date, but that was OK. The more footage we aired, the more engagement we’d get. Especially as more personal tidbits—like Jim and Nicole’s marriage or Bella and Michael’s past romantic history—were revealed.

Well, fingers crossed anyway.

Sean snorted at me. “Who do you think you’ll ‘date’ this week, Ms. Work-Hard-Play-Hard?”

I set my phone down and rolled my stiff neck and shoulders. Too many hours on the computer this weekend. “Who knows?” I yawned. “Doesn’t matter.”

Since most of the early voters were going to be people we knew, they’d probably pair me with Tripp as a laugh.

Once we got past the initial round and more strangers started voting, however, I had high hopes for being paired with Michael. I was counting on the fact that Bella and Michael together would seem boring. But the sweet, good guy paired with the bad girl...interesting, right?

Take that, Hell's Bells.

My triumphant smirk faded; even her nickname wasn't fun anymore now that the web series was named Single Bells. It was like we'd named the show after her. Grrr.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Did you get the extra camera guys?” Sean asked, a worry line forming between his eyes.

“Yeah.” I sighed. Over the weekend we had the rather obvious realization that there was no way Sean could film all the dates going on simultaneously, even if we staggered the timing as much as possible. So Carol and I had recruited three other dudes, which hadn’t been easy since we couldn’t offer much payment. I’d be clearing out a lot of Greta’s beer inventory as thanks, that was for sure. “They’ll be coming by early on Wednesday to get a feel for the equipment.”

My phone chimed, announcing a new text. I expected my zillionth message today from Carol. But to my surprise, it was actually the lawyer handling Greta’s estate. Please come by my office at 1 today, Ms. Zielinski. There are some details I need to discuss with you regarding Mrs. Bradley’s final wishes.

Now? I’d been pestering him for months trying to figure out what was happening with Greta’s shop and he finally deigned to respond to me on the worst possible day? This morning I needed to prepare the shop for prime time and do a Geek Squad appointment to fix the printer at a plumbing office. There were still a dozen details I needed to tend to about the web series, all before I reported for a two p.m. waitressing shift at the Vienna resort restaurant.

But sure, let me drop everything and run to your office.

Lawyers.

\*

“Sorry I’m late,” I called as I burst through the doors of Donald Schlender, Esq’s office, not sounding sorry at all. But the GeekSquad appointment had taken twice as long as I’d expected. Fixing the printer was easy, but the plumber had also asked me to take a look at his slow laptop while I was there, and that thing was an unholy mess of outdated software and virus vulnerability.

Mr. Schlender frowned and pointed to a chair in front of his desk. “Now that you’re here, I can describe the details to you both.”

Both?

Of course Bella was sitting in the other visitor chair. Suddenly, it all made sense. The lawyer couldn’t settle Greta’s estate until Bella was in town; all this time I’d been waiting on her. Well, that was a familiar feeling.

Bella was looking at me, blue eyes big and lips parted. But all she settled on was “Hey, Jane.”

I rolled my eyes, huffed, and slumped in the chair, glaring at the ceiling. I was almost grateful for the supreme irritation with both of them. Otherwise, I might be fighting back tears or the omnipresent Greta-lump in my throat.

Mr. Schlender picked up a piece of paper and looked at us over the rims of his glasses. “Mrs. Bradley had very clear and distinct wishes for her estate upon her death. The two of you are the main beneficiaries, although she bequeathed some specific jewelry and items in her home to her daughter, Angela.”

We both nodded dutifully. Bella’s hands twisted in her lap, and I wondered if she’d been over to Wontana to visit her mother yet. On her ultra-rare and ultra-brief visits to the area, she’d always stayed with Greta.

Mr. Schlender smiled at Bella. “To you, Miss Bradley, Greta has left her home in Falworth. I will give you all the paperwork, including the latest assessment, in case you choose to sell.” Bella nodded quickly, a tear spilling out of the corner of her eye. Was she staying at the house right now? I could barely make myself even drive by it, the old Victorian where we’d both grown up.

His smile faded into sympathy as he switched his gaze to me. “To you, Miss Zielinski, Greta had set aside a bank account.” I sighed, already knowing where this was headed. I saw Greta almost every single day. Fighting the illness had taken everything—including her savings. “But unfortunately, there wasn’t much in it at the time of her death.”

He sounded like he was making apologies for her, and I didn’t like it. “She needed the money for her doctor’s bills and to keep the shop afloat. No big deal. I don’t care.”

Bella whipped her head to me, forehead furrowed in confusion. “What? But—”

I really, really wanted to scream at her. Scream at her for not knowing exactly how sick Greta had been for so long and how much it had taken out of her. Scream at her for not helping Greta with her failing business. Scream at her for waltzing into town now with her sweet smile and a big bunch of money—both things that would have helped Greta six months ago.

But as infuriated as I was at Bella for not being there, I also suspected Greta hadn’t told her. Not about the struggling shop and not about the cancer, until it was inevitable. Protecting her granddaughter, giving Bella the life she dreamed of—that had been Greta’s *raison d’être*. She would not have wanted Bella to give up everything she’d worked so hard for to come back here. For what? I could almost hear her scoffing at me. To help me clean my shop? Give me my pills?

It had been a lot more than a little cleaning and pill distribution in the past year. But it didn't matter. She hadn't needed Bella. She'd had me.

"The last asset of note is Greta's business. She owns the real estate, the building in the town center, free and clear. The current inventory as well. All of the associated licenses can be transferred."

He paused, and I held my breath. It's going to Bella, I warned myself. Greta's life was that shop and Bella. Of course she would leave it to her.

But. But. But. I'd been helping her run it for more than five years now. I didn't love the business, exactly, and it had never been my dream to own it, but the shop felt more like home to me than my own apartment. Plus, it was now a key part of my life improvement plan.

He sighed. "It's complicated, but the gist of it is that she's left the shop to both of you, fifty-fifty." Next to me, Bella inhaled sharply and I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake. Greta deserved a good shake too.

Well played, Greta. From beyond the grave, you're going to do the one thing you couldn't do in life: make Bella and me talk again. There was no way we could figure this out without extensive conversation.

Or maybe...

I turned to Bella, cutting off Mr. Schlender discussing tax implications. "I'll buy you out."

She gaped at me. "What?"

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“I’ll buy your fifty percent,” I said quickly. “You don’t live here. What are you going to do with half a shop in Falworth? You live in Chicago.”

She did not care for the harsh tone of my voice at all. “This is still my home, J-Bird. Maybe I want to buyyouout!”

The fucking nerve of her. How dare she? How dare she threaten to take the place where I’d spent the happiest hours of my last decade? It would be so easy for her too. She clearly had the money, since she was running around buying Christmas Villages.

Where did she get that money anyway? I knew she had a good job, but I also knew she’d taken almost two years off to write some fancy computer software. Hmmm. Maybe she’d finished it and sold it? That would be surprising, as she used to blather on and on about contributing to the “free software movement” someday, but maybe she’d changed.

Not that it mattered. All that mattered was that Bella had the money to back up her offer and I didn’t. I had some savings, but they were “in case my jobs fall through, I can survive the winter in my shitty apartment” savings, not the kind that could buy a business. I’d have to take out a loan to do that. Even the thought of taking on the debt caused the rational part of my brain to begin fashioning an ulcer for my stomach. What was I thinking? How could I even consider a loan? The business was failing.

“Well,” Mr. Schlender set the paperwork down on his desk and clasped his hands. “You two can talk about that later, because we’re not quite finished here. Greta has one last wish to share.” He pulled an envelope from a folder; I could see Greta’s handwriting on the outside.



“It’s a letter to you. Both of you.” He cleared his throat, as if on stage. “Shall I read it?”

“No!” Bella and I exclaimed in unison. We didn’t want Greta’s last words to us delivered in Mr. Schlender’s voice.

I was about to tell him to leave us the hell alone, but Bella smiled sadly at him and wiped her eyes. “Do you think we could have a few minutes of privacy in your office, Mr. Schlender? We’ll read it together.”

He softened and stood. “Of course.” The door shut behind him.

“Take it out of the envelope and just lay it on the desk,” I said. Bella nodded and slid out the single sheet of paper with her long, elegant fingers and placed the page on the edge of the desk. We both stood over it to read.

My darling girls,

Bella and Jane, you have been the joy of my days. Thank you—thank you for being the loves of my life. That is the most important thing I needed to say. I hope, wherever I am, that I’m too blissful or full of light or whatever to be missing you both with every part of my heart, but that’s hard to imagine.

I didn’t want a funeral. Just the idea of the whole town gathering without me made me crazy with jealousy—even if they were talking about me!

You know what I do want though? The two of you to spend a night together, celebrating me. Talking about all of our memories—the ones the three of us shared and the ones I’ve shared individually with each of you.

It’s mid-August as I write this letter, and I know that I won’t be here for the holidays.

So here's the deal, my loves. You'll be spending Christmas Eve together this year. A sleepover in the house. Remember our amazing Christmas Eve sleepovers when you were little? You were both so determined to catch Santa in the act, but you could never keep your eyes open past eleven, thank goodness.

Anyway, this year I want you to talk all night and toast me with mimosas on Christmas morning. \*That\* is the life celebration I want.

Love is such a small word for all I feel for you.

Greta

My face was entirely wet and my nose was embarrassingly close to dripping. I snuffled and blindly looked around until I found a tissue box on a nearby shelf. Bella covered her face with her hands and dropped back into her chair, shoulders shaking.

I couldn't even be mad about Greta's meddling, not when every word of her letter had been written with such care and adoration. I missed her so much my soul hurt.

Bella's face finally emerged from her hands. Her eyelids were swollen, her face pink and blotchy. "Jane."

I didn't know what she wanted from me at this minute, but I couldn't give it. Of course I'd honor Greta's last wish—I would have honored hundreds of them. I would spend Christmas with Bella, fine.

But until then...I cleared my throat and pushed back my shoulders. "I have to go to work."

"Jane," she said again, and this time there was an irritating mix of exasperation and condescension in her voice.

“For Greta, I’ll do Christmas,” I said impatiently. “But nothing else has changed. And I want the shop.” I looked at my watch. “Shit. Gotta go.”

She looked like she wanted to protest, but I said, “Maureen’ll be pissed if I’m late for my shift,” and she snapped her mouth shut and looked at me with sad eyes. Or with pity? Probably. Like every other teenager in the nearby towns, Bella had worked at the resort restaurant in high school. She probably remembered Maureen’s legendary temper.

She probably thought it was unbelievably pathetic that I still picked up shifts there as a grown woman. Sorry to embarrass you, Bells. But not all of us could go to college and get set up for a lifetime of success. Some of us got stuck here.

I let the door slam behind me on the way out.

## Chapter Five

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

The resort was hosting some sort of convention for dentists this week, so the entire place was overflowing with guests. As I headed for the restaurant, I paused at the concierge desk and shoved a stack of flyers about the Christmas Village beside the pamphlets advertising other activities in the area. A bunch of smiling dentists with perfect teeth would make a nice background addition to Wednesday's filmed tree-decorating date.

Speed-walking now, I whipped my apron from my bag and tied it around the waist of my jeans with practiced hands. I winked at the hostess, and she mouthed my section number at me. Maureen didn't appear until I'd delivered drink orders to three tables and turned their orders in to the kitchen, so she gave me a gracious nod instead of haranguing me about being five minutes late.

A single man was sitting at the last table in my section, the best window seat in the house. In the summer, the bright green of the golf course was eye-catching. In the fall, there was red and golden foliage in every direction. Right now, though, it was just brown and bare. And as I approached and realized the man was Bella's city boyfriend, I stifled a groan. I'm sure the lack of anything to look at outside—as well as the lack of organic produce or sushi on the menu—was not increasing his appreciation for southeastern Wisconsin.

“What can I get you?” I asked, voice flat. He probably wouldn't even recognize me.

Nate—that was his name, right?—looked up at me and blinked. “J-Bird! Do you work literally everywhere around here?” I hadn't been around many British accents, but his wasn't exactly upstairs Downton Abbey-esque.

“Pretty much.” I poured him ice water from a pitcher. “If you call me J-Bird again, I will make sure that everyone in the kitchen spits in your food.”

His lips turned down as he perused the menu. “I ate here last night, and so I wonder if that might actually improve the flavor of the dish.”

My nostrils flared as I suppressed a smile. The resort restaurant was always packed because it was the only place on site to get a meal. But he was right. The food was generally overdone and under-seasoned.

“Get the turkey chili and the bread bowl,” I advised. “The rolls come from a local bakery, and you can add hot sauce to the chili.”

“Done!” He snapped his menu shut and grinned up at me. No, he wasn’t Bella’s usual type at all, but I could get why she went for him. There was an energy about him. Like his very presence changed the air molecules around his body. Made them fidget or dance. It was transferable too—it made me feel more awake, more charged.

I took the menu and nodded, backing away. “Wait!” he exclaimed.

But before he could go on, Maureen appeared at my side, looking crazed around the eyes. I knew that look. “Is the POS system down again?” I sighed.

She nodded frantically. “Thank God you’re on shift.”

I left Nate’s table without a backward glance and went to troubleshoot. The restaurant’s machine was way glitchy, and I had to fuss with it about twice a month. “You have to replace this, Mo,” I lectured her for the fourth time as we crossed the restaurant. “This model stopped being supported years ago. One of these days I’m not going to be able to fix it.”

“That’s what you say every time,” she replied.

By the time I got the stupid thing up and running again, the kitchen was done with my tables’ food, so I delivered them quickly. To Nate’s, I dropped off four bottles of different hot sauces with his chili. “Thanks! Hey, I want to ask you something,” he started. “Not food-related.”

But the bartender was waving at me from across the room. The kid couldn’t mix drinks for shit. Most people ordered beer or wine, so he survived. But every time he attempted something more complicated than a gin and tonic, the drinks were returned. “Hold that thought and eat your chili,” I said to Nate. “I’ll be back.”

Two dirty martinis and six dessert orders taken later, I stopped by Nate’s table again. I kinda liked how he had the caps of all four hot sauce bottles off. Instead of choosing one to dump into his bowl of chili, he was adding individual dashes of sauce to each bite.

His nose was bright red and a little sweaty. He held up the last bottle and shook it at me. “This one is hot,” he said cheerfully.

I scoffed at him. “Not really,” I lied. “I gave you the baby sauces.” Untrue. The bottle he was holding up was a nine on the Scoville level, and I was honestly impressed he was going in for another taste. I’d seen that particular bottle make grown men weep.

He wiped his face with a napkin. “Listen, since I’m going to be in town now for a whole month, I don’t want to stay at the resort the whole time. I need a recommendation for somewhere else. A short-term rental maybe.”

“My apartment building does month-to-month rentals,” I said, thinking of the empty unit on the other side of Sean’s.

But...

I cocked my head at him. “You’re going to actually stay in Wisconsin for the whole month?” I’d assumed he was going to drive back and forth from Chicago when he had to do his Single Bells dates. “Don’t you have a job?” I asked bluntly.

He didn’t take offense. His teeth flashed. “Yes, I have a job. I run my own technology marketing firm. But I don’t need to be in a particular office. I usually work wherever I am.”

Must be nice. I thought of all the gas money I could save if I weren’t constantly moving from place to place to work. It was almost a thirty-minute drive from my apartment in Falworth to this restaurant.

He went on. “I’m staying in Wisconsin for the month because I need to be around Bella.”

Blech. Of course. “How romantic,” I said, pulling out his check.

His eyes widened in apparent shock. “Oh. No, we’re not—it’s not—Bella and me aren’t dating or anything like that.”

I frowned down at him in confusion, and he shook his head quickly. “We’re...coworkers, in a way. She hired me to help her launch a software product.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

What? That didn't make any sense. "Why in the world did you sign up for the dating series then?"

He leaned back in his chair. "Bella hired me two weeks ago. Her product is launching in March, which means we basically have no time to get everything in place. She's designed a great product, and I'm excited to be a part of it. If we do this right, it'll be a huge success. For her and for me. But this is her first rodeo—she has no idea the amount of work it takes to get the PR, marketing, communication, and training in place."

He sighed. "A week after she hires me, she tells me she's going to Wisconsin for the entire month of December. Not a big deal, I thought. I'm used to working with clients remotely." He shook his head. "But right away, it was clear that it wasn't going to work."

"Why?" I shifted my weight to one foot, intrigued for no reason.

He blew out a long breath. "She's staying at her grandmother's home, and there's a terrible internet connection. Our Zoom calls dropped half the time."

I winced, sort of taking it personally. Greta would never let me fix it. "When you're in this house, you're off the clock, Jane," she'd say gently. She also preferred to read in the evenings instead of being on any sort of screen. "What do I need fast internet for anyway?"

"That wasn't even the bad part," he said. "Since she got here, she doesn't seem to be able to concentrate on work at all. She's mourning her grandmother—which I get!



But out of nowhere, she's also spending all of her time helping that Carol woman with the Christmas Village."

His frown got deeper. "Then she walked into the diner last night, and the minute she locked eyes with her ex, I wanted to groan."

That made two of us. "Why?"

He snorted. "Because if she goes nuts for a bloke, that'll take all of her remaining focus. If I have a few of those web series 'dates' with her, at least I can be sure of her attention for several hours at a time."

He looked down at the calendar app on his phone and back up at me. I recognized the stress in his gaze now. I saw it in my own eyes every morning in the mirror when I thought through my daily schedule. "We have so many deadlines to hit in the next four weeks. If she's spending every minute with that lumberjack himbo, we'll miss them."

"Michael's not a himbo," I said defensively. "At all. He's very smart."

Nate paused at my auto-defense, and then a slow smile spread across his face. "Oh."

I should have put the Scoville 10+++ sauce on the table.

"So he's why you signed up," he mused.

"No!" Not totally. I crossed my arms over my chest.

"This is great!" Nate said, leaning forward. "Totally great."

I began clearing the dishes from his table onto my tray. "You've lost me."

“Don’t you see?” He beamed at me, a bright smile laced with malice. “We can work together. Try to do things that will get Bella paired with me and Michael paired with you.” He rubbed his hands together maniacally. “It’ll be fun too. Hatching schemes?”

What kind of lunatic actually used the phrase “hatching schemes”?

But isn’t this exactly the kind of thing I’d been planning on my own with my “bad girl” persona? Maybe it wouldn’t be terrible to have a cunning partner for this kind of thing, especially since I now needed to focus on other important stuff too, like figuring out how to buy out Bella’s half of the shop.

Besides, weren’t “alliances” a key part of reality TV?

“Deal.”

\*

I slept hard that night, and when I woke it was to Sean pounding on my front door and Bruce barking in response.

“The votes are in!” Sean said excitedly, standing on my stoop with an open laptop and two to-go cups of coffee.

“And I needed to know them right now, at the butt crack of dawn?” I snapped, yawning and squinting at my watch.

I forgave him though when he handed over one of the coffees and said, “I’ll go walk Bruce while you wake up, and then we can look at the results together.”

I handed over Bruce’s leash and harness, muddle-headed and grateful I didn’t need to face the brisk November wind. Bemused, I popped a couple of English muffins in the

toaster and got out some butter and jam. I hadn't seen Sean so invigorated by anything in the time I'd known him. The kid had so much potential.

When he and Bruce reappeared, his nose and ears were red. "Brrr. It's not even thirty degrees yet."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

I huddled deeper in my robe and wished I'd splurged on the soft pair of matching slippers. "OK, spill. How many people voted for the web series dates in total, and what are the pairings for the first date?"

He opened his laptop and cleared his throat. "We had forty-five people vote in total." I nodded, unsurprised. A pretty tiny number, and certainly all from our town. But that's what we expected for the first vote, prior to most things being filmed and with our tiny amount of PR. I expected (hoped) that number to grow exponentially as we posted more and more.

"Our first pairing..." He cleared his throat dramatically, clearly enjoying himself so much that I found my own mouth curving behind my coffee mug. "Bella and Michael."

My mouth went flat, even though I'd been expecting this. This town had a sentimental streak a mile wide, and they obviously remembered the senior prom king and queen through some very rose-colored glasses. "Next."

He angled his head toward the screen. "The guy that came home with Bella—Nate? He's paired with Jim's ex. Nicole."

Nate and Nicole? I smiled. I could guess exactly where that came from. Nicole had a tight squad of close girlfriends. Her girls obviously were rallying behind her during her separation. They'd taken one look at the list of eligible men and chose the hot British stranger from the city for her. Well done, ladies.

Sean looked up, mischief in his gaze. "Fourth pairing is you and Brian."

I nodded and bit my lip, trying not to groan. There was nothing wrong with Brian. He was Carol's son, after all, and she'd raised a decent human being. But Jesus, I'd known the guy my whole life, and he barely ever spoke. If he did talk, it was about fishing. Or hunting. Or the latest problem with his boat engine. "OK," I sighed. "Go on."

"Jim is paired with Diane." I giggled, picturing Jim's glowering face as he was forced to go on a date with Diane, at least twenty years his senior. That was the doing of Nicole's girlfriends again, no doubt.

I scrunched my nose. "Which means that Tripp is with Mabel the librarian." I felt a little bad for her. I was unsure of her motives for doing the series, but it probably wasn't her goal to go out with a dude who spent his entire life in three places: the gym, the pub, and Vienna's spray-tan facility. He was harmless, but he was a meathead. I did appreciate all the money he spent buying Busch Light in Greta's store though.

I gulped down some coffee and got up to pace, thinking it all through. "We've got to make the most of what we've got for the first episode. There has to be enough drama to get people invested, to get them voting and watching."

I met Sean's eyes. "Obviously, you guys will film as much as you can of everyone's dates, but my advice is to get the most footage of Bella and Michael, Nate and Nicole, and Jim and Diane." These were our best stories right now...the high school lovers reunited, and the separated couple on dates with other people.

\*

Tuesday passed in another blur of work: three Geek Squad appointments, updating the Christmas Village website as more and more details came in, and decorating the wine shop so that it was camera-ready.

When I woke on Wednesday morning, I let myself laze in bed. I had no waitressing shifts today, and my only Geek Squad appointment was after noon. I could actually relax this morning, for once.

But then my damn phone rang. Carol, naturally. “What?” I moaned into the receiver.

“Good morning, Jane dear.” She sighed. “We have a problem.”

## Chapter Six

I drove to Wontana, muttering and swearing under my breath. What did Carol honestly think I could do about this problem?

Yes, the newly created ice-skating rink in our Christmas Village was one of its largest attractions. And yes, having it populated with skaters would be an important background visual for our first set of web series dates tonight. Because of its center positioning in the square, it would look odd and sad if it was completely empty.

“The Wontana rink advertisement was just in the paper this morning,” Carol fumed. “Free admission tonight! It’s never been free before! This is an obvious attempt to steal business from our grand opening.”

I’d yawned into the receiver. “Yeah, maybe.”

“It’s cruel and unnecessary,” she’d snapped in a very un-Carol-like manner. “Wontana has more money in its coffers than ever before. Real estate there is through the roof, and their entire downtown got a huge remodel last summer. They don’t need one night of our revenue! Where the hell is the small-town solidarity?”

“Carol!” I’d pushed myself up on my elbows. “Did you just say H-E-double hockey sticks?”

“Go over there this morning, Jane,” she’d pleaded. “Before it opens. See if you can reason with them. Originally, I’d been hopeful they might even close for the night to encourage people to come celebrate with us, but that was obviously a pipe dream. Now, I would just settle for them charging their normal admission price.”

“You want me to try to convince Terry Oakley to change his mind?” Terry owned the rink, along with a half dozen other businesses. He’d been in my high school graduating class, but we didn’t have much to do with each other back then or now. His family was one of the few wealthy year-round residents in the area, and smugness was his defining feature.

“Just try, Jane. What do we have to lose?” Carol asked.

“My one free morning,” I grumbled under my breath. But I sighed sharply into the phone and got out of bed anyway. I was trying to become a pillar of the community, after all.

The Wontana rink was so bright against the morning sun that I winced and shaded my eyes. The fact that there were manmade ice rinks in multiple towns in the area kind of made me sad. When I was a kid, we’d skate in a cleared area right on the lake. But global warming being what it was, the lake didn’t fully freeze over anymore, and skating on it was unsafe.

Terry’s office was in an adjacent building, and his red Porsche was the only other car in the lot at this hour. Just as I was preparing to march in and call him out for being a greedy jerk, another car pulled into the lot. I didn’t recognize it, but the moment the door opened, I recognized the thick blond hair and light blue peacoat. Bella.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Well now, I should have anticipated this. Carol had called both of us to handle this project. Maybe she thought I'd fail on my own. More likely, she was trying to parent-trap us together to repair our broken relationship. But, Carol, despite watching both versions of that movie dozens of times in our childhood, Bella and I were not going to follow the path dictated by Hayley Mills and Lindsay Lohan. No way, no how. My lips pressed into a flat line as Bella gave me a confused frown and raised a tentative hand.

The passenger side of Bella's car opened, and Nate got out, looking as irritated as I felt. In his arms, he held a laptop and a few file folders. Ah. They must have been working when Carol called, and Bella's abandonment of the task at hand was causing the tension around his lips and eyes.

I blew out a long breath. The thing was, Bella was far better for this mission than me. Terry had a thing for her in high school. Right now, Bella's mother was one of the top-performing Realtors on the entire lake, and her mother's husband worked at an investment bank in Milwaukee. Terry would respect Bella a thousand times more than me.

"You should talk to him," I said by way of greeting. I jerked my thumb toward Terry's car. "He'd be much more likely to listen to you."

"Doubtful," Bella said. "I could sweet-talk him all day, but Terry's just going to patronize me while trying to look down my shirt."

I almost laughed. Bella's angelic look disguised her realistic way of seeing the world and pithy word choices to sum up what she saw. I'd forgotten that.



I huddled deeper into my leather jacket and slid on a pair of sunglasses that I'd found in the pockets. I wanted the armor of the mirrored lenses against her. It unsettled me to think that she might be remembering me as clearly as I was her. "Well, he thinks I'm trash, and my plan was to charge in there and call him a selfish asshole, so I think your sweet-talking is a better idea."

Nate looked back and forth between us. "Want me to try?"

To my annoyance, Bella and I laughed in unison. "Bad idea," she assured him.

Yeah, if a handsome out-of-towner tried to tell Terry anything, he'd probably make admission to the rink free for the entire month of December. "You stay out here," I warned.

He leaned back against Bella's car, resigned. "Fine." He made a shooing motion at Bella. "Go ahead then. The sooner this is over, the sooner we can get back to work. You're already booked for the entire afternoon setting up for tonight's tree-decorating event. We need some time to work this morning. Please."

Bella sighed, looking a little guilty for being called out. But there was...relief?...on her face too. Relief to not be working on whatever Nate wanted her to work on? I found that odd. To call Bella a conscientious person was an enormous understatement. Her dedication to her schoolwork, academic clubs, and test scores had been the stuff of Falworth legend. From Greta's anecdotes, she was apparently the same at college and in her career. So it was weird that she wasn't one hundred percent dedicated right now to working with her business partner.

Bella squared her shoulders. A pleasant smile formed on her full pink lips, and she walked toward Terry's office.

As the door closed behind her, Nate opened the car door. I thought he'd sit in there

out of the cold, but he just threw his stuff on the seat, shut the door, and came over to me. “Chances of this actually working?” he asked.

“Slim to none. Maybe if we’d known about it before the ad in the paper, Bella could have convinced him. But now?” I shook my head. “Terry’s not going to change his mind when he’s already publicized his free admission. It’s bad business. Terry’s a jerk, but he’s also a solid businessman.”

“So why did you agree to come then?” Nate looked at my face, genuine curiosity in his.

I sighed and threw up my hands. “Who knows? I’m obviously overinvested in this whole situation.” I kept talking truthfully, for some reason, even though I didn’t really want him to repeat this conversation to Bella. “The shop I’ve been running won’t make it through the year without a huge jump in revenue, so I’ll do pretty much anything to try to make things work.”

Nate’s dark eyes furrowed at the edges. “So your participation in the dating show...is that more about the survival of the business or Bella’s himbo?”

I glared at his deliberately provocative language. “Two birds, one stone.”

The sunglasses pinched the bridge of my nose, and I turned back to my car. I wasn’t needed here. Bella would try, fail, and that would be that. I opened the driver’s side door, but just as I was about to climb back in my car, my gaze lit on the mechanicals shed on the side of the rink.

Oooooooh.

I shut the car door quietly and took a meandering stroll to the shed, looking over my shoulder. Because of the angle of the parking lot, the shed couldn’t be seen from the

office building, and this section of Wontana didn't have a lot of drive-by visitors at this time of day.

Despite my web series persona, I wasn't an actual bad girl. The sneaky new idea that slithered through my brain was not something I would have usually acted on. But I'd heard the weary combination of hurt and anger in Carol's voice this morning. Why did Terry Oakley have to be such a jerk? If the town of Wontana knew their neighboring town was on the precipice of dying, why would they not make a tiny concession to help us survive?

I lifted my jaw. When they'd announced free admission to the ice, they'd fired the first shot. What I was contemplating was simply an act of self-defense.

I put my hand on the handle of the shed door and gave it a tiny tug. I expected it to be locked tightly, and if it had been, my nasty new plan would have evaporated into the winter morning air. But it swung open easily, and my estimation of Terry's smarts went down several notches.

"J-Bird?" Nate whispered as I slid into the shed.

"If you keep using that nickname, I'll kill you and drag your body in here to rot," I called back.

He ignored my threat and followed me in, turning on the flashlight of his phone to illuminate the dark space. "Are you thinking sabotage?"

I liked a man who could get directly to the point. "Yup."

I pulled up Google on my phone and tapped a few search items. "Ice rinks are basically all about refrigeration," I muttered. After I'd done a Geek Squad call at a mansion on the lake with its own backyard rink, I'd been curious and done a little

research. I knew the basic science of how they were built and how the equipment worked.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Hold the light over here,” I whispered, pointing at a series of pipes.

Nate angled the beam exactly where I needed it. “What will you do?”

I reread the article on my phone and then squinted at the compressor. “Between the pipes in here and the ones that go under the rink, there should be a tiny expansion valve.” I ducked and moved forward a few feet. “Aha! There!” I pointed and Nate swung the beam to highlight the small valve.

“What are you going to do to it?” he whispered, sounding utterly fascinated.

Despite the fact that I was breathing in dust and spiderwebs, I chortled and rubbed my hands together gleefully. “Close it. I’m not positive, but I’m hoping that’ll mess with the pressure. It’s supposed to be in the mid-forties today. If the refrigerant temp doesn’t drop as a result of the pressure, the skating surface might not remain solid ice.”

“Diabolical,” he breathed, but it sounded like a very intense compliment. Especially with his dark eyes burning on my face like that.

I hurried a few steps forward, weirdly warm for the cold morning. “Meh. It’s minor sabotage at best. All they’ll have to do to fix it is turn the valve back on.” I turned the valve off quickly and efficiently. “Depending on Terry’s monitoring equipment and/or staff time arrival, they’ll either notice the change in pressure and temperature right away and come fix it or it’ll still be broken near opening time.”

Sabotage complete, I started to lead us out. “So let’s hope Terry is cheap enough that

he didn't splurge on good equipment or a robust staffing model. The rink can't open if their surface is slush."

Nate paused, so I slowed, too, peering out the cracked shed door to make sure that the coast was still clear.

"What if we hedged our bet?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Is this Terry mechanically inclined himself?" Nate wondered. "Is he the sort of person who receives notice that something isn't right with the ice rink and so he would come straight in here and say, 'Ah, the valve is off'?"

I snorted at the image. "No. Terry wouldn't be able to explain the basics of refrigeration if there was a gun to his head. I doubt he's ever stepped foot in this shed."

"Just as I suspected." He cringed. "Embarrassingly, a man after my own heart." He held up his phone. "Do you know who he would call? Are there many different vendors in the area who would service professional ice rinks?"

Oh. Now I knew where he was heading. Brilliant. "There are really only two in a practical radius," I said, a giggle bubbling in my chest.

A flash of those white teeth. "Falworth is opening a skating rink for the first time tonight. Wouldn't it be completely normal for you to have a multifaceted safety inspection? Maybe reserve time this afternoon with both places to ensure opening night is a smooth success?"

I nodded, eyes wide and mock-serious. "Very reasonable indeed."

The giggle escaped my chest after all as I called Carol and explained what was needed. To her credit, she asked no questions. There was just a long pause and then a considered: “Thatdoessound like a good idea, Jane. Safety first!”

“Safety first,” I repeated solemnly. Then, as an afterthought: “Have Jim give both of the guys an open bar tab after their appointments as a thanks for the last-minute scheduling.”

“It’s important to treat vendors well,” she agreed, and now I could hear the giggle in her throat. A full night of free beer would be difficult to walk away from if one or both of the vendors got a panicked call from the rink on Wontana.

I hung up the phone, still chuckling to myself. Nate was still staring at me, a small smile on his lips. “What?”

He shrugged, eyes glinting. “I’m just admiring your general sneakiness.”

“Right back at you,” I volleyed. I’d forgotten how good a little shared mischief felt; I hadn’t had a partner in crime in years.

We stepped out of the shed into the thankfully still-empty parking lot. Well, empty except for Bella, who was examining both of our cars as though Nate and I might have been hiding in the trunks. “Oh, there you are!”

She looked between us and the shed, her eyes narrowing on my still-giddy face. I was disconcerted again. She coulddefinitelystill read my facial expressions as well as I could read hers. “Oh God. Do I even want to know?”

“You do not,” Nate said, stepping away from me to pull her to the car by her forearm. “You promised, Bella. Can we please get in a few hours of work now?”

She shrugged and got in the driver's side. Nate paused to look at me before opening the passenger door. "See you tonight. J-Bird."

I gave him the finger and got in my car.

## Chapter Seven

Wednesday, December 3—Single Bells—Date 1—Opening Night of the Christmas Village



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Pairings:

Bella and Michael

Diane and Jim

Nicole and Nate

Mabel and Tripp

Jane and Brian

Our ice rink was absolutely packed. Skaters with festive hats and bright parkas slid in a slow circle under beautifully strung lights and in time to the music playing from a band in the nearby pavilion.

There was no line yet for Santa, but he looked great in his little elf house, perched on a big white chair. As I watched, he pulled a mug from under his seat and took a long, slow drink. That better just be cocoa, Mr. Kringle. I made a mental note to send Carol over to check his breath. The last thing we needed was an inebriated Claus.

The smell of fried cheese curds and burgers from the food stalls competed with whiffs of peppermint and hot chocolate and funnel cakes. My stomach growled; it was a good thing I hadn't eaten yet. If Brian and I grabbed dinner, at least that was something to film.

There was a small private tent set up in one corner of the square specifically as a

gathering area for Single Bell participants. Inside, there were mirrors and lights set up for putting on makeup, an equipment dumping ground for the camera crew, and a small backdrop with a stool where we'd film another cornerstone of reality TV: private confessionals. Video commentary from the participants we'd intersperse with date footage in the editing process.

Throwing my bag on a chair in front of the mirrors, I headed to our ragtag group of cameramen. I still needed to primp, but this was more important. "Huddle up," I called. Sean snapped to, and the rest of the guys looked at me warily. "Get as much footage of everyone as you can, obviously, but Bella and Michael are your stars tonight. Make sure you get the beginning of their date. The moment the long-lost sweethearts lay eyes on one another."

I had to grit my teeth to get the words out, but we needed compelling stories, and theirs was the best we had right now. "After them, focus on Nicole and Nate—especially if they cross paths with Jim. If Nicole or Jim look at one another or their dates, I want it on camera. Got it?" Sean nodded seriously, and the others followed suit.

When I returned to the makeup mirror, Diane was advising Nicole against applying enormous fake eyelashes. Mabel was staring down her reflection, probably giving herself a pep talk. Giving up on the lashes, Nicole fidgeted nervously. Her hands were shaking as she applied lip gloss.

"You look great," I said to her in passing. It was the truth. Her chin-length brown hair, normally back in a messy pod, was blown out and shiny. I'd rarely seen her in anything other than a flannel shirt, but tonight she wore a fitted red sweater that flattered her curvy figure. Nate would have nothing to complain about.

"Thanks." She gave me a wry smile in the mirror. "It's been a dozen years since I've been on a first date."

Finished with her makeup, Bella sat in front of the mirror in an expensive-looking ivory blouse, looking down at her phone. I glanced at her reflection and heard my own voice say, “Bells, you’ve got your weird eye thing again.”

She automatically jumped to the mirror. “Oh God. Left or right?”

We both froze. Our eyes met in the mirror and then I broke the contact and moved as far away from her as I could, while she slowly cleaned up the eyeliner that always bled from the upper lid of her eye to the space just below her eyebrow.

I could have asked myself: Where the hell did that come from? But I already knew. It was just...rote. Bella and I had gotten ready next to one another in the mirror for our entire childhood and teen years. When you know someone’s face and habits as well as your own, particularly in your formative years, that kind of shit just sticks with you.

It didn’t mean anything.

Hurriedly, I pulled out my small makeup bag and threw on mascara and a little bronzer. I brushed my hair out of its ponytail until it hung straight to my elbows. I was sticking to my black-on-black look with the same black jeans and a black turtleneck sweater.

Carol entered the tent, her white hair curling crazily and her cheeks bright pink. “Everyone!” She clapped. “As planned, Jim treated all of the gentlemen to a beer at the pub for courage, and now they’re waiting for the ladies by the Christmas tree.”

Half the camera crew left at Carol’s announcement, and the rest stayed here to film our path through the Christmas Village to the tree.

“How is the tree decorating going?” Bella asked.

Carol beamed at her. “Perfect! Thank God the ladders were the right height. We’ve got the lights strung. There are several people working at our tables to create ornaments to hang. It’s going beautifully. You all will spend time there, obviously.”

“Doubt it,” I muttered under my breath. It was a cute idea, but we needed varied activities to film. Viewers didn’t want to watch people sitting at tables, poring over arts and crafts. I was hoping Tripp would drag Mabel straight for the beer tent and then to the carnival games. We needed alternate action to shots of Bella and Michael hanging cherubs on the fir or whatever adorableness they’d get up to.

In my confessional, I said that I was “ready for my date and open to whatever the night held” and attempted to smolder sexily into the camera. Which clearly didn’t work, because Sean asked me if I needed a Tums when we were done.

Then we were slowly walking to the tree, with cameras filming us from the front and behind. Bystanders eyed us curiously, although most of them were locals and in on the gossip. I sure hoped the camera crew was remembering to pan around, to get shots of the Christmas Village from every angle. It looked really great in here. Better, even, than my memories of its height in popularity.

If only Greta could have seen this.

We paused at the edge of the clearing where the tall Christmas tree stood waiting, the men standing at spaced intervals around it. At the head of the line, Bella went to meet Michael, but I couldn’t see their greeting, as he was on the other side of the tree. As planned, the rest of us each waited a few minutes before walking to our dates to give the camera crew a chance to film each introduction. After that, the night would be more of a free-for-all.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

When it was my turn, I lifted my chin and walked steadily to Brian, who was wearing a hunter-green sweater and jeans under a brown hunting coat. “You look nice,” we said to each other in unison before also laughing in unison. I relaxed. Maybe this date wouldn’t be such a drag after all.

“Want to grab some food?” he asked. “Or...” He gestured to the tables of wire and glass and other assorted ornament-making baubles, where Bella, Michael, Diane, and Jim were sitting at spaced intervals. Nicole, Nate, Mabel, and Tripp had vanished. “Did you want to do whatever this is instead?”

“Let’s eat,” I said. We left the clearing, no cameramen following us. Sean saw us walking away, and I mimed eating a burger. He gave me a thumbs-up.

Brian looked concerned. “Is it bad that we’re not being recorded?”

I was a little surprised. I had no idea why he was doing this web series in the first place, but I’d never expected him to be actually interested in the reality TV part. “They’ll find us in a bit,” I said.

We waited in a short line for food and drinks, then settled at a table. I politely asked about his holiday plans, and he asked me how work was going. Then, three full minutes of silence as we polished off our french fries.

Maybe it was the beer I’d bolted down or maybe it was the fact that soon the camera would find us, therefore likely limiting our honest interaction. “Brian, why the hell are you doing this?” I asked bluntly.

He hesitated, and I felt for him. I wouldn't want to answer that question truthfully either. "If I know why, I can help you," I said. "I'm basically directing the crew and editing the footage. Also, if you particularly want to date one of the women, we can do stuff to sway the vote."

He took a long swig of beer. "I'm...not interested in any of the women. Sorry," he added as an afterthought to me.

I waved it away. "No worries. So this isn't about dating for you. Are you just trying to help out the town then?" Carol had seemed surprised by his participation, but maybe I'd read her wrong. "Did your mom ask you to do this?"

He flinched. "God no. She's completely flummoxed."

If Carol was flummoxed, I was growing more interested by the second. "Tell me!" I insisted.

His face grew a little pink under his beard. "Two reasons. First, I plan on self-publishing a novel in the spring, and I don't have the budget for any real marketing. I thought if I mentioned it on a few dates, it would be a little free PR."

I could appreciate that thinking. I was always a sucker for practicality. "Nice," I said. "And the other reason?"

He buried his nose in his beer. "I just got dumped," he said quietly, flush growing redder. "I was dating someone long-distance for a few months. Someone I met online. No one in Falworth even knew, not even my mom. But I thought the relationship was going somewhere. I'd gone to visit her a few times, we'd met in different cities for weekends. Then she dumped me three weeks ago."

Oh my. This was amazing. "So you're doing this to make her jealous?"

He squinched his face up. “I guess? I know she still looks at my socials because she likes and comments sometimes. I thought if I linked to the series and...I don’t know, looked cool in the dates, she might...” His shoulders slumped. “It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“No!” I exclaimed. “I’m so glad you told me. Brian! I will edit you to look cool. And a few of the women in the series are really pretty. If we get a few shots of Bella or Nicole smiling up at you—your ex is going to go crazy!”

He perked up. “Really?”

“Absolutely!” I saw one of the camera crew bearing down on us. “OK, showtime. When they start filming us, I’ll ask about your book.”

He nodded seriously but then paused, a fun glint in his eye. “If you wouldn’t mind smiling up at me, Jane, please do so. You’re the kind of pretty that would make an ex super jealous too.”

I grinned just as the red light of the camera popped on. “You got it.”

After dinner, Brian and I wandered to the pavilion to listen to the band for a few minutes. I wanted to highlight the live music part of the Christmas Village—that might intrigue potential tourists. Then we played a dart-throwing carnival game, in which I almost impaled a teenager. We’d definitely cut that little bit from the footage.

Just as we decided to cap off our date with a hot cocoa, our bored cameraman wandered off for a cigarette break and Nate appeared at my elbow, looking frantic. “J-Bird, thank God. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Brian looked at Nate’s wild eyes and eased away. “I’ll grab the drinks.”

Bemused, I watched Nate look over my shoulder and then behind his back. His hair and collar were a little rumpled, like he'd been moving at high speed. I placed my hands on my hips. "What's got you all rattled?"

His eyes widened. "You know that one contestant, Jim? The one who owns the pub? He totally loathes me for some reason. He flat-out ignored me in the pub when we were all supposed to be having a pre-show drink. Served everyone but me. Tonight, every time I see him, he's scowling at me with rage-eyes like a homicidal maniac." He threw up his hands. "I know it sounds insane—"

"It doesn't sound insane." I cut him off, sighing. Oh, Jim. "I mean, you're on a date with his estranged wife, after all."

Nate's mouth dropped open so widely, I could practically see his tonsils. "I'm what now?"

"Jim and Nicole." I shrugged. "They've been married like ten years? Separated for three months or so."



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Fucking hell!” Nate bellowed. “I didn’t know that! Oh my God!”

“Stop yelling,” I hissed. His outburst was starting to make our cameraman look interested. He threw his cigarette butt on the ground but picked it up and threw it into a trash can after I glared at him. He bent over to retrieve his camera.

“Everyone else knew,” I told Nate. “Jim and Nicole decided they both wanted to participate to help the town and...move on from each other, or something.”

“That’s possibly the most idiotic idea I’ve ever heard,” Nate exploded.

I didn’t disagree. “Great for reality TV though,” I said cheekily.

He huffed down at me. The temp had dropped throughout the evening, and I could see his breath in the air. “Look, fun’s fun. I agreed to do the series to help out and hopefully get time with Bella. But I didn’t agree to get my face smashed in!”

Oh, but that would be so great for the series too, I almost said aloud.

His eyes narrowed anyhow.

If Jim did punch him, Nate would probably quit though. And then we’d be uneven in numbers again and I’d have to redo the entire schedule. Just the thought of more time at the computer was enough to make me weep.

I sighed. “Well, how did the date go? Do you intend to pursue Nicole after-hours?”

“No!” he exclaimed. “Good God. I am not in this for romance—you know that.”

I waggled my eyebrows at him. “I wasn’t talking romance, dummy. I mean, do you plan to hook up with her?”

“No!” he practically shouted again. The cameraman walked toward us with a determined stride, never mind that I was waving him away. “She’s a perfectly lovely woman, but no. She’s not interested in me. I’m not interested in her.No!”

“Fine, I’ll call off Jim,” I said, regretfully typing a warning text to Nicole’s apparently territorial ex. “Imagine if he’d done more than glower tonight. What a kick-off to the series it would have been.”

“I’m sorry my undamaged face displeases you,” Nate said stiffly through gritted teeth, and the proper phrasing made me laugh.

My phone beeped, and I nodded at Jim’s reply, satisfied. “Go about your evening, sir,” I said in my own terrible attempt at a British accent. “Your countenance will remain unpunched.”

The camera was in my face and the red light was on. “Get out of here,” I said to the cameraman. “Go film something else.” He looked reluctant, and I snapped, “I’ll cut this anyway, so it’s a waste of time.” He frowned at me. “Go find Tripp and Mabel. He’s probably trying to convince her to make out on Santa’s lap or get matching tongue piercings or something.” That perked him up, and he hustled away. He’d probably been annoyed he’d been stuck with a boring couple all night.

Nate’s lips curved, and he nodded down at my phone. “What did you say to Jim?”

I held it up so he could read my exact words.Stop being a caveman to the dude with Nicole tonight. He’s not going to bang her.

A sharp bark of a laugh escaped him. “Why, J-Bird, I had no idea you had such a talent for poetry.”

Brian returned, handed me a cocoa, and promptly yawned so wide I could see his molars. “Sorry.”

“Want to call it a night?” I asked. “I think we got enough.”

“Yeah.” He yawned again. “I have to get up really early for work.” He gave me a side-armed hug. “Thanks for everything, Jane.”

Nate watched him walk away and raised his eyebrows at me. “More thanks to you? You’re quite the puppet master for this little endeavor, aren’t you?”

Now it was my turn to yawn. God, what a day. “I guess so.”

Nate snapped his fingers. “I can repay you for my unpunched face! I know where Bella and Michael are right now. Let’s wander over there. I’ll distract Bella for a bit, and you can have a few recorded minutes with Michael.”

“Now?” I thought longingly of my soft bed. I wanted a nap so bad I could practically feel my cozy comforter wrapped around me.

“If the web series watchers never see you interact with Michael, they’ll never vote for you to be paired on a date,” he said.

Annoyingly, it made sense. “OK.”

As we walked back to the pavilion where the band was winding down, I saw Tripp and Mabel sitting on a bench. He was holding up a bicep and flexing, more to the camera than to her, and she nodded at polite intervals, clearly bored. Poor Mabel. I

hoped she got paired with someone else next time.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“There.” Nate pointed. Bella and Michael were standing on the edge of the dance floor, nodding in time to the music and intermittently sneaking glances at one another. Ugh. My lips and jaw tightened. Two hours in and Michael was completely under her spell again.

Unbidden, a memory from our prom flashed in my mind: Michael looking awestruck at Bella in her pale blue gown as she was crowned queen. Bella’s face drawn tight as she looked away from him and found my gaze in the crowd of buzzed high school seniors. Me giving her a steady, reassuring nod.

She’d hated the attention, hated that Michael was so distressed at the thought of them going to colleges so far apart. He’d gotten a football scholarship to a small Division III school only an hour away from Falworth. “Come with me,” he’d earnestly tried to convince her earlier that day.

Which was ridiculous because Bella’s grades and test scores had earned her an incredible scholarship, a full ride to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, arguably one of the best public universities in the country. “I don’t want to hurt him, but I’m not changing my plans,” she’d sobbed to me before the dance, crying off half her makeup.

“Of course you’re not,” I’d said, ignoring the stab of jealousy. With my less-than-stellar academic performance, there’d been no scholarship for me. No acceptance letter to a university either. I was planning to move to Madison as well, though. I was going to live in an apartment with Bella, get a job, and enroll in a community college. Hopefully, I’d get good enough grades and make enough money to transfer in within a couple of years.

Now, I wished I'd chosen the spiked version of hot cocoa. How silly I'd been.

"I'll ask Bella to dance," Nate said. "Or is that against the rules for the Single Bells dates? Are we not supposed to cross streams?"

I gratefully shook myself out of the memories. "There are no Single Bells rules," I said wryly. And Nate breaking up the darling couple for a dance with Bella would be good drama. Although I didn't want it to seem like there'd been something lacking with his original partner. "Just make sure you say something nice about Nicole in your confessional though. Make it clear that you asked Bella to dance because it was clear Nicole wasn't interested in you or something."

Nate paused and looked down at me with a quizzical, amused expression. "For someone who comes across as so prickly, you're actually kind of a softie, aren't you?" I ignored him.

With a determined stride, he walked through the half dozen dancing couples, approached Bella, and dramatically offered her a hand while cocking his head toward the dance floor. The two cameramen who'd been filming Bella and Michael perked up. One followed Bella and Nate to the dance floor, the other focused on Michael's darkening expression.

That was my cue.

I sidled up next to him, flicking my hair back over my shoulders and hoping I still had some remnants of lipstick on. "Hi, you."

He glanced down at me. "Oh. Hey, Jane." His eyes went straight back to Bella.

On the dance floor, Nate twirled her around expertly. She laughed at the unexpected spin, and Michael blew out a long, huffy breath. I bet he'd been too chicken to ask

Bella to dance. Michael was good at a lot of things, but dancing was not one of them. It was something we had in common.

I licked my lips and tried again. “Having a good night?”

He didn’t look down at me, but his expression softened. “Yeah. Really good, actually.”

I waited for him to return the favor, maybe ask me something about my night. But he was too busy staring at Bella, and the silence between us stretched on. Inwardly, I sighed. He was never going to pay attention to me when Bella was literally dancing in front of him.

The song ended, and the swaying couples parted to applaud the music. Another yawn attacked me—it was time for me to head home for that nap. The cameramen were due to be off shift in fifteen minutes anyway. Sean and I would regroup in a couple of hours to edit tonight’s footage. We needed to get the first dates episode posted tomorrow.

I walked away from Michael—without him noticing—and headed back to the tent.

In my confessional, I said lots of nice things about Brian. “Still waters run deep with this one. Turns out that the strong, silent type is very sexy, you guys.”

I also mentioned that he might be a good fit for Bella, hoping a few voters might be curious enough to vote for that pairing instead of putting her with Michael again. I spoke snarkily about Tripp, saying that he looked like he could use a lesson on being a better date because Mabel looked so bored.

Contestants talking shit about other contestants was a hallmark of reality competition TV.

Nate joined me in the tent just as I finished. “Well?” he demanded. “How did it go with the himbo?”

I flicked my eyes heavenward. “Not well,” I admitted. “Michael’s never been able to see anything else when Bella is around.”

“Ah. Well, when you have your date together, you’ll just have to make sure she’s nowhere nearby so he can see you,” he said.

I was too tired to even appreciate his support. “Mm-hmm.”

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “he did glance in your general direction as you were walking away, and then the cameraman shifted to film you walking away too.” He snapped his fingers and elbowed me. “I think you could edit it to appear that Michael was checking out your arse. Give those voters something to think about, eh?”

A laugh escaped, despite my exhaustion. “That’s a pretty good idea,” I admitted.

“It’s a pretty good arse too,” he quipped, those white teeth flashing.

I glanced up, mock-offended. “Only pretty good?”



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Apologies, J-Bird,” he said, holding up his hands. “You have a truly excellent arse.”

“Don’t you forget it,” I called at him, giggling, as I headed to my car. It was kind of fun to have someone to joke with during this thing.

### Chapter Eight

On Friday night at nine p.m., I flipped the wine shop’s open sign to closed. There’d been an uptick in visitors in the past couple of days since it was so adjacent to the Christmas Village. Which was good, but the trend needed to continue exponentially for the shop to survive the winter.

Hopefully, tomorrow night’s Single Bells dates would help with that. The first night dates had been to feature the grand opening of the Christmas Village, but the dates tomorrow were intended to highlight local businesses. Carol had sent out an instructional email to all of the web series participants this morning: Purchase Christmas gifts in the wine shop or the thrift store. Grab holiday goodies in Diane’s bakery or enjoy one of the brand-new Christmas-themed cocktails in Jim and Nicole’s pub. Fill your trucks’ tanks in Michael’s gas station, highlighting how convenient it is to the Christmas Village for tourists.

I had tacked my own rude follow-up onto Carol’s message: You guys, we need more viewers on the web series. Do not be overly polite or boring on your dates. Say interesting or scandalous things! Make out if you feel like it! Swear! And when episodes are available, share on social media! If you have any friends with big online followings, please get them to share! The more eyes, the more tourists!

It was a lot more exclamation points than I normally used on anything, but I wasn't happy with the number of viewers so far on our first episode. Less than a hundred people voted for the pairings on the second round of dates. We needed a much wider reach.

Since I'd be on a single date myself, Carol was going to man the shop's register tomorrow night during filming. With a critical gaze, I examined the space one more time before closing. I'd put out Greta's holiday decorations, and the small store was at its best. White lights twinkled over the displays. Classic figurines of Santa were sprinkled all over the store. Bing Crosby was ready to croon on demand. While I was out, Bella had dropped off two fresh wreaths. One hung outside on the door and another hung just under the register, making the shop smell like pine and spruce.

The wreaths were just the finishing touch the décor needed, but the fact that they came from Bella made me snarl. I hadn't had an ounce of time to think about how I would buy her half of the shop out. I needed several hours with my laptop and spreadsheets, to look at my savings and research interest rates on loans. But between my various jobs and the web series, I hadn't been able to carve out that time. Driving home in my truck, I wondered if I had the energy to tackle that project tonight.

My stress thoughts were interrupted as I pulled into my apartment building's parking lot. Nate was there, dragging a big duffel bag into the vacant apartment on the other side of Sean's.

I slammed my car door as I got out, and he reappeared in the parking lot, this time going for a bag of groceries. "Hello, neighbor," he called.

"You were able to get a one-month rental?" I asked.

"Yup! This unit was partially furnished, so here I am." He held up the groceries. "Very relieved to have a different dining option than the resort restaurant."

“I bet.” I pulled my keys out and walked to my door.

Nate leaned back against his car and looked up at the big, black winter sky. “It’s so dark here,” he said softly. “I can’t get used to it.”

His awed tone made me laugh. “It’s night. Of course it’s dark.”

He smiled at me, looking sheepish. “It doesn’t get dark like this in the city,” he said, tone still soft as if trying to be reverent of the night. “The streetlights are always on. Lights from all the buildings and businesses. Constant car headlights.”

He moved his body in a slow full circle. “I’d forgotten.”

“Forgotten?” I asked, pausing with my key in the lock.

“Yeah.” He shifted the groceries in his arms. “I grew up in a really small town in northern England. Not all that different from this. I owe you an apology, actually.”

Huh? I turned to face him with a crinkled brow.

“It was very rude of me to call this place a shithole in the bar when we first met. I’d been having a frustrating day, and being in Falworth was reminding me of my own hometown. Not the good parts. But there’s no excuse for insulting a place I didn’t even know. I’m sorry.”

I waved away his apology, kind of fascinated by the fact that he was from a similar town. He was so sleek and urbane, it was hard to imagine him originating from a rural place. “But you got out,” I said without thinking. “Like Bella.”

“Is that a note of jealousy I hear, J-Bird?” He took a few steps toward his door but kept his gaze on me.

Probably. “When I was younger, I’d always planned to move away from here,” I admitted. “I wanted to live in a city. To have an entirely different kind of life.”

God knew why I was talking about this. Maybe it was because the night was so big, black, and achingly quiet around us. Silent and magnetic, pulling out intimacies with its gravitational force.

“Why didn’t you?” His soft tone emphasized the short, simple question.

A simple question that did not have a very simple answer.

“Reasons.” My voice was more curt than I intended. I turned the key in the lock and pushed open my door.

I was halfway inside when I heard his soft follow-up. “Are there still reasons?”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Pretending I hadn't heard, I let the door shut behind me.

\*

Saturday, December 6—Single Bells—Date 2—Local Businesses

Pairings:

Bella and Michael

Diane and Nate

Nicole and Tripp

Mabel and Brian

Jane and Jim

“Are the cameraguys clear on where they're supposed to be?” I shouted out to Sean. He was sitting at my kitchen table while I got ready for my “date.” Because all of the couples would be functioning independently tonight instead of just wandering around the Christmas Village, we'd needed to be stricter on filming assignments.

“Yeah.” Sean frowned at his laptop screen. “Every couple is going to meet at a different business, and their assigned camera guy will be there earlier to capture their greeting.”

“Did you send them my feedback on their filming?” I called. To say that editing the footage of the first date was challenging was like calling a Mount Everest climb “a hike.” There were literal hours of footage of the ground. Half of Bella and Michael’s date had been completely out of focus. One guy moved his camera so quickly from side to side that I got motion sickness. Something had been wrong with the audio on Mabel and Tripp’s date; their footage had been completely silent. Not that I’d minded missing Tripp’s loving soliloquy about the benefits of intermittent fasting.

“I reworded some of your comments,” Sean said carefully, a politician in the making. “But yes.”

He looked up at me as I sauntered into the room in another black ensemble, this time leggings with an off-the-shoulder cotton top. “Do you own any clothes with color?”

“Shut up.” I went to my coffee table and retrieved a pair of earrings. “Who are you assigned to tonight?”

“Diane and Nate,” he said. I stifled a grin. Nicole’s friends had apparently not been thrilled at him for asking Bella to dance after his date with Nicole, so they’d voted for him to be paired with the matron of the group. Diane had also called Nate as a snack in her confessional, which made me cringe and want to claw out my own eardrums. Perfect for reality TV. That woman knew what she was doing.

“Diane’s being sort of weird, though,” Sean said as an afterthought. “I’d thought I’d meet them at her bakery, but she said she’d text me an address right before the date is supposed to start.”

I shrugged. “She probably needed more time to decide which local restaurant would look the best on camera.” Diane and Nate wouldn’t be one of our more interesting couples tonight anyway. Our big stories for this episode were Bella and Michael

again (blech) and Nicole paired with the hot idiot.

I was really hoping that Tripp would make the moves on Nicole. Jim would punch him into next week and oh, the drama. Fingers crossed.

Mabel and Brian did not seem like the most dynamic duo for filming, but who knew? Maybe they'd have some quiet chemistry. Jim and I had a bickering brother-sister vibe, so we weren't great for TV either, which was fine with me. After our camera guy filmed our greeting at Diane's thrift shop, I'd dismiss him to go focus on the others.

Since it didn't take hours to buy a bottle of wine or baked goods, it was likely that a few of the couples would wander back to the Christmas Village for the remainder of their date. Earlier today, I'd noticed something new throughout the Village—several random arbors with mistletoe. Carol had probably arranged for somebody to bodily shove Bella and Michael under one. A kiss from the sweethearts would be great for the show, I mused before catching myself. Hey—no! I didn't want Michael and Bella kissing.

I pulled on my leather jacket and threw Sean his puffer coat. "I'll see you tonight for another editing party," I said.

He yawned and nodded, squinting at his buzzing phone, presumably at Diane's text. "See ya."

Followed by my cameraman, I stalked into the thrift store, my high ponytail swinging behind me. "Hey, Jane," Jim mumbled, not even bothering to look up from his phone.

"Hey." I made my voice artificially bright. "I've always loved this place. They have such cool stuff," I lied. I hadn't bought anything here in years. But we were plugging local businesses tonight, and Diane had earned the right to properly highlight her

business. I waved my arm expansively for the camera to follow and film the store's racks of clothing.

"Diane left something for you on the counter," Jim said. He followed my lead and began browsing the racks, giving the cameraman something to film.

"Oh," I said, face falling. I'd thought to dismiss the cameraman and we'd just sit in here and talk for an hour or so. Relax. But if Diane had left something she expected to be filmed, I couldn't ignore it. I eyed the box with trepidation. If she'd set out some sort of pink dress, I was going to be livid.

But, to my genuine shock, I pulled something very intriguing out of carefully wrapped tissue paper. The note that accompanied it read: "This just came in two days ago, and I set it aside for you. It's perfect for your new look."

I whipped the item of clothing out of the box with a vivid snap, and my mouth dropped into a smiling circle. They were leather pants. Designer leather pants. Barely worn and just my size.

Oooh. I stroked them, almost against my will. Thrift store or no, I had no business splurging on such a ridiculous item of clothing at a time like this. Where the hell would I wear leather pants anyway?



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Try them on,” Jim called. “What else are we gonna do?” Oh, fine. Reality TV viewers generally liked any sort of wardrobe change or shopping montage.

In the dressing room, I took off my comfy leggings and tugged the tight leather up over my hips. They were crazy-snug on my butt, but I supposed that was how they were supposed to fit. Not that I could tell, because there was no mirror in the dressing room.

“Come out, Jane,” Jim said. “Let’s get a shot of you in them, and then we can head to the pub for a drink.” I wondered if he actually wanted a beer or if he just wanted to spy on Nicole and Tripp. Sighing, I left the dressing room. Luckily, I could always cut this out later if I looked terrible.

But I didn’t even make it to the mirror. The camera guy kept filming but hissed at me, “Your phone is blowing up! Mine too. They’re both ringing over and over.”

That didn’t sound good. I reversed direction from the mirror and grabbed my phone from my coat. I had six missed calls from Sean and four from a number with a 312 area code. Chicago?

Before I could listen to any of the voicemails, the phone rang again with the Chicago number. “Hello?”

“J-Bird!” It was Nate’s laughing voice in my ear, but I could barely hear him because of the pounding music in the background.

“Your intrepid friend-neighbor-cameraman has been quite intent on reaching you,”

Nate said. “So we’ve both been calling you nonstop. He believes we might have a bit of a problem here.”

In the background, the song transitioned from “Pour Some Sugar on Me” by Def Leppard to “Girls, Girls, Girls” by Mötley Crüe.

“Where are you guys?”

## Chapter Nine

I drove way too fast on the back country roads, but in my defense it was difficult to concentrate with Carol’s voice on speakerphone and the camera filming me from the back seat.

“How did I not know that Diane owned The Satin Lady?” I exclaimed, taking a rough turn on County Road B. Gravel crunched loudly under my tires. On the outskirts of town, The Satin Lady was the only strip club in a fifty-mile radius and thus a rite of passage and traditional mecca for every teenage boy and stag party in this part of the state. “Did you know?”

“Of course I did.” Carol sounded offended. “Greta and I lent her the money to buy it twenty years ago!”

I was so shocked I dropped the phone in my lap. Carol heard me sputtering. “The real world isn’t all picturesque Christmas Villages, Jane.”

“I know that,” I snapped, righting the phone on my left thigh. I lived in the real world every damn day.

“Then stop acting all appalled,” she said. “Diane runs a good place, a tight ship. It’s not seedy, and it’s not sad. She pays the women extraordinarily well, and she takes

care of them. It's a legitimate local business, just like all the others."

I took another wild turn, causing the cameraman behind me to lurch and the camera lens to thunk against the window. "I'm not being judgy about the business, Carol. But what is she thinking to bring Nate there on their date for the web series?" We couldn't run around filming naked women! I imagined our cameramen getting arrested, the video equipment impounded. That would put a swift end to our little series.

We pulled into the half-full parking lot. It was eight p.m. or so on a Saturday night—would the crowd grow as the night got later? Or maybe this business had been impacted by the town's loss of revenue as much as all the others. Carol kept talking as I sprung out of the car. "I imagine she was thinking about your email earlier today. Wasn't that you encouraging scandalous behavior and anything that might bring more eyes upon our little show?"

Guilty. My steps slowed as my brain started working again. Shock and adrenaline had propelled me here, but now Carol's words really sunk in.

Maybe this wasn't totally insane.

"Man, this is so awesome," our cameraman muttered giddily, still following us.

Sean met us at the door, his camera down and eyes wild. "Jane, thank God. I had no idea what to do."

Behind him, the interior of The Satin Lady greeted us in all her glory. At least a dozen women in G-strings and thongs walked the premises, some with cocktail trays, some in tiny costumes. On long, low sofas, several men in flannel were being treated to lap dances, twenty-dollar bills clasped between their fingers. On a catwalk connected to the stage, a dancer writhed to Metallica while upside down on a pole,

held up only by the strength of her thighs. I took a moment to appreciate her athleticism.

In full panic, Sean kept babbling. “This can’t be legal to film! I’ve only recorded a little bit of the room and Nate and Diane’s faces when they walked in. And a confessional with Nate, which was basically just him laughing so hard he cried.”

Conflicted, I put my hands on my leather-clad hips and surveyed the wild scene. This would be reality TV gold, but the legality question was a sticking point. We couldn’t broadcast footage of naked women without their express permission, and we certainly couldn’t record any of the customers either.

“J-Bird!” Nate bounced up, eyes electric and face dusted with pink glitter. Either the stuff was in the air or it had been rubbed on him by a pair of breasts. “Is Jim here too? I didn’t know that tonight was to be a double date. How lovely!”

“Don’t start,” I warned. Jim hadn’t come with me. I encouraged him to go to the pub instead, hoping to film some drama. Diane joined our growing group. I narrowed my eyes at her and crossed my arms over my chest.

“To the bar, friend!” Our cameraman pulled a very willing Nate away to grab libations.

Diane pushed back her shoulders. “Am I in for a morality lecture, Jane? How tiresome.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“No!” I said, exasperated. “I honestly kind of love that you own this place.” Her posture relaxed. “But, Diane, why’d you have to spring this on us? You have to know it’s a logistical nightmare. We can’t record or post footage of these women.”

She smirked. “Way ahead of you, darling. There are four dancers who are willing to be recorded and included online, and I have their written permission already documented.” She winked at me. “We won’t do them totally nude either. I have some great little outfits picked out for them, and they’re excited to show off their moves onstage. Their routines are phenomenal.”

Oh. My lips quirked as the outrageousness of the evening caught up with me. Sixty-something Diane was on a date with thirty-something Nate and she took him to a strip club that she owns—and we were going to be able to put some of this on our show?

Holy shit. Not only would people know they could come to town for Christmas Village G-rated fun but also Decemberbachelor parties! Adventurous couples’ weekends! It was a whole new market.

“OK.” I rubbed my hands together. If done right, this could be funny and shocking all at once. So much fun. I nodded to myself and beckoned both Sean and the other cameraman to me. “Here’s how we’ll do this.”

\*

At four a.m., I collapsed on my sofa next to Sean. We’d been at The Satin Lady until after eleven, and then we’d rushed back here to cobble together our episode.

The Satin Lady was going to rule this episode, no doubt, but there were other juicy tidbits as well. Bella and Michael had been strolling through the Christmas Village, reminiscing and reconnecting, when they caught sight of an upcoming mistletoe arbor in the same instant and stopped walking. Then they'd fumbled all over themselves trying to figure out how to not walk under it without talking about it. In the end, they did walk under it, and Michael awkwardly kissed Bella on the cheek. They both flushed vividly red, and the camera caught the whole thing. The pure sweetness of it was a perfect foil to the strip club shenanigans.

Another great moment: Brian and Mabel talking intensely in the bakery while buying gingerbread houses for their various family members. The camera didn't catch their conversation, but Brian said something to make Mabel laugh, hard, and it changed her whole appearance. Her eyes went shiny and a previously hidden dimple dented her right cheek.

And finally, Tripp and Nicole sipping a cocktail in the corner of the pub when Jim walked in. Everyone behaved themselves, much to my disappointment, but there was one interesting moment when Nicole and Tripp were playing pool. Their cameraman caught Jim in the background, staring. Not at Tripp with anger but at Nicole...with a sort of wistful longing.

"Almost done?" I asked Sean, my voice hoarse from shouting over hard rock for hours.

"Nearly." I could see the gas station coffee he'd pounded on the way back in his wired eyes. "Send me the footage of the other dates and I'll put the episode all together."

"I can help you," I said, slurring the words.

"Nah. You've gotta work tomorrow," he said. "After I post the episode, I'm just

gonna sleep all day.”

Grateful, I stumbled into my bedroom and collapsed face-first on my mattress, asleep before I could even take off the leather pants.

\*

The next day, I finished with a Geek Squad appointment around noon—an enterprising soul near the Christmas Village had decided to buy the kind of Christmas lights that changed colors and patterns along with the beats and frequencies of the music played on their devices. But buying that kind of thing and understanding how to set it up were two different things. By the time I had the lights dancing along to Rudolph, I was running twenty minutes late and had to hightail it to the town center to open the wine shop on time.

Bella was sitting on a stool behind the register when I got there, looking at the screen of her laptop. Half owner of the store or not, I was about to harangue her for being there when I noticed her glazed expression and parted lips. She raised wide, bright eyes to my face. “Oh my God, JZ.”

Another old nickname. I used to like that one though. Now, it threw me off-balance.

“Wh-what?”

She swiveled the laptop to face me. It was the statistics dashboard of the platform that hosted our web series. I looked at the numbers and blinked. Blinked again. “That can’t be right.” I shook my head.

According to the counts displayed on the page, nearly 28,000 people had viewed the most recent episode of Single Bells. I refreshed the page. “There must be a bug.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said slowly. “You said to share widely, right? Well, a few months ago I met some really interesting women in Chicago. They all work in technology, and I thought they might know someone with a big social media presence.”

Bella bit her lip, eyes glinting, a mischievous Pandora who was a little shocked by what came out of the box. She grabbed the laptop back and navigated to Twitter. “Look.”

I frowned at the Twitter handle. “Who is @RozNGod?” The photo associated with the profile was of a tiny rodent-like dog sitting on a woman’s lap next to a remote control.

Bella’s shoulders began to shake, the way they did when she wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. “It appears to be an account of a sassy older woman who watches TV programs with her dog, named God, and live-tweets commentary on them.” She gulped. “She has more than 17,000 followers.”

My eyes widened on @RozNGod’s latest tweet, a post from last night. It was a link to Single Bellswith one pithy sentence. “This is some funny shit. #DianeRules.”

I grabbed for the keyboard and went back to the web series platform and looked at the polling to see how many people had voted so far on the couple pairings for date three. “Oh my God.” We’d received 21,541 votes so far. As I watched, it went up to 21,542.

The phone next to the register rang. I ignored it and kept staring at the screen.

The phone rang again, and Bella hit the speaker button and cleared her throat. “Falworth Wine and Liquor.”



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Bella, is that you? It’s Carol.” Her voice was strangely breathless, like she was jogging.

“Both Jane and I are here,” Bella said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” Carol screeched, making us both jump. “Nothing is wrong! Everything is right!”

“For God’s sake, settle down,” I snapped. “What’s going on?”

Over the phone line came a doorbell ding. Bella stood from the stool and pointed across the square where Carol had just emerged from the diner, phone to her ear.

“Girls, Airbnbs and motel rooms in Falworth are now more than half-booked for the rest of December. I’ve got a diner full of unfamiliar faces. There are dozens of people wandering the Christmas Village right now, and it doesn’t even open for another hour.” Across the square, she began waving at us and grinning like a loon. “It’s working, girls! You two are the magic! It’s working.”

Bella and I exchanged amused glances—before I remembered that I hated her and looked away. On the phone, Carol’s voice went from joy to all business. “We need to redo our supply estimates for everything. We should also extend hours of the Village. I’m going to keep the diner open two hours later on the weekends. You may want to extend the wine shop’s hours as well. Jane, update the website. Bella, call Jim—”

And, she was off. I zoned out and kept my eyes on the laptop screen, watching the numbers continue to rise.

## Chapter Ten

Watching the numbers on the web series dashboard became a bit of a hobby for me over the next few days. Not that I had time for a hobby. I still had shifts at the resort restaurant, Geek Squad appointments to service, and the wine shop to run. Not to mention any errand for Christmas Village maintenance that Carol could think of.

But the pride I felt when I saw the chock-full Christmas Village on December 9 was hard to quell. It was bursting with curious tourists who actually looked like they were having a good time.

It was a little odd to overhear certain snatches of conversation though. From two women in their twenties sipping spiked cocoa:

“Where do you think Bella and Michael are?”

“Probably making out somewhere off-camera. There’s no way they’re not getting together outside of the series dates, no matter what they say when they’re being recorded.”

I might have thought the same, except I knew their schedules were as crammed as mine. I’d seen Bella’s car next to Nate’s in the mornings, so they were working. In the afternoons, Carol had Bella doing Christmas Village work. Grudgingly, I’d allowed Bella to man the register in the wine shop in the evenings so I could honor my restaurant shifts. So, no off-camera dates for the high school sweethearts, but speculation couldn’t hurt the show.

From an adult mother-daughter combo in line for baked pretzels:

“You should look for that bearded quiet man. He seems like a catch.”

“Brian? He is kinda hot. But I like Nate. God, that accent...”

Tripp was so excited by his current fifteen minutes of fame that he took to strolling through the Christmas Village and various Falworth businesses off and on all afternoon. Normally, I’d roll my eyes, but the tourists who recognized him would often take pictures and post them online. So, it was good for business.

As for me, I tucked my long, dark hair under my hat and just kept moving. I was so busy that half of me couldn’t wait for the damn holiday season to be over. But the other half thought about the never-ending, frigid January approaching—everything would go back to normal then. Everything would be so quiet.

So it was good that Bella’d been able to help the past couple of evenings, but she needed to realize it was only temporary. That the wine shop was not going to be half hers in the future. Was I supposed to take orders from her about it once she’d left town? That didn’t make any sense, and it wasn’t fair.

For once, I didn’t have to work at the restaurant tonight. I’d head over to shop and take back control. In my kitchen, Sean was rooting around for some potato chips. “I’m going out for a bit,” I told him and then paused. “How are the pairings shaping up for tomorrow’s date?”

“Votes are still coming in, but it’s pretty clear to see which pairings are set in stone and which ones are in flux,” he said, grabbing a carton of French onion dip out of the fridge to go with his chips.

I slid on my coat. “Who is set in stone?”

He stuffed some chips in his mouth and opened his laptop. “Bella and Michael,” he said, crunching away.

“Of course.” I groaned. “That’s three in a row for those two.”

He looked up at me and grinned. “This one is new: Jim and Nicole.”

“Oh!” I bit my lip. So, viewers were voting for the separated married couple to go on a date. Apparently, they’d been enjoying Jim’s territorial and wistful behavior. I hoped Jim and Nicole would be OK with this. I was actually kind of excited to see what each of them had said directly to the camera. Which made me want to smack myself. I wasn’t supposed to be getting invested in anything but sales numbers at the shop.

Grabbing my car keys, I headed for the front door. “See you.”

“There’s one more couple that has so many votes right now that they’ll definitely be a pairing tomorrow,” he called.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Really?” I paused. No other pairings had much of a story so far. Nothing that would generate a definite viewer tilt. “Who?”

Sean swallowed so loud I could hear it. “You and Nate.”

I swiveled. “What? Why?” That didn’t make any sense. In the first episode, there’d been barely any footage of us together, and neither of us had said anything about each other. I hadn’t watched every single minute of the second episode, but I’d edited half the thing myself.

Except I’d allowed Sean to do The Satin Lady parts. I’d only scanned through them on fast-forward. But why should that make such a difference? I’d been in the footage a little, as I talked to Diane and the dancers. Sean had captured me arranging how to approach some of the filming—behind-the-scenes footage that I agreed gave the segment more depth.

“I don’t get it. If we randomly ended up paired but I had similar counts of votes to go with Brian or Tripp, I would understand. But it’s not like that?” I confirmed.

Sean shook his head. “If you look at the mathematical trends and the time we have left, it’s extremely doubtful that enough votes could change the match-up.”

“But why?” Not that I cared one way or the other. I just wanted the mystery solved.

Sean scratched his chin. “I have a theory. Come look at this ten-second clip from The Satin Lady.”

Frowning, I stood behind him at the kitchen table and waited until he found the section of the recording he wanted and hit play. The camera was on Nate as he leaned back on a couch, a drink in his hand, while the distinctive beats opening of “Closer” by Nine Inch Nails filled the sound of the club. He wore his typical, relaxed, slightly sardonic look, nodding his chin to the music.

But then his facial expression changed. His eyes focused on something in the distance, and he went still. Cocked his head in an assessing way. Was that a tiny lick of his lips? The camera drew closer as the angle of his jaw changed and his eyes went dark, his concentration complete.

He looked...carnal.

Like he wanted to devour what he was looking at. Like he was imagining an entire X-rated scenario in his head with the object of his admiring gaze. As if the lyrics of the refrain of “Closer” aligned perfectly with his current thoughts.

Then, the camera scanned the room slowly to catch whatever was in his sights—and settled on me.

I was in my off-shoulder black top and leather pants, instructing the participating dancers on timing to come down the catwalk. Then I half turned and yelled at the cameraman next to me. Grabbed Diane’s shoulder and pointed for her to go do something. Those dang pants did look good on me. I might have looked sexy if I weren’t barking orders at everyone.

Now, I smacked Sean so hard at my kitchen table that he yelped. “So Nate was staring at one of the dancers and you edited it so it seemed like he was looking at me instead? Why?”

Sean looked up and fiercely shook his head. “No! He was looking at you. No one else.

For practically the entire night. This was just one example.” He shrugged. “You’re the one who tells us to find stories in what we’re recording.”

“This is not a story!” I howled. “It was just—” Nothing. It was nothing. “A weird look,” I finished lamely.

Sean put his nose back in his laptop. “Well, the viewers do not agree.”

I thought about that look every instant of my drive into town. It distracted me as I parallel parked on the square. There were so many cars that I had to park two blocks away, and I didn’t even get annoyed. Slowly, I walked to the shop, idly noting that now it was way too cold for my leather coat, and I needed to dig out my parka when I got home.

God, what a stare that was. His eyes were like a black hole. The intensity. The hunger.

For me?

I was so distracted by Nate’s stupid stare that I didn’t immediately order Bella out of the shop, not even when a bunch of browsing customers finally paid for their purchases and wandered into the square, leaving the two of us alone.

“Lots of sales today,” Bella said, jotting notes in Greta’s journal. “If this keeps up, we’ll need to reorder or reprice the inventory.”

Normally, I’d snap back at her so hard she’d blink. I knew ten times as much as she did about how to run this store, and she could keep her damn opinions on how to operate it to herself.

But instead, my stupid mouth said, “Did you watch the latest *Single Bell* episode?”

She sighed. “Yeah. I’m still cringing at how moronic I looked when Michael kissed my cheek under the mistletoe. I looked like a snow owl having a heart attack.” In another moment, I might have laughed at that comparison. Bella’s big blinking eyes and white feathery coat, the way she looked so startled and stiff when Michael’s lips touched her cheeks. A snow owl having a heart attack, indeed.

But right now I just stayed silent.

Clearly, I was making way too big a deal about this. No one else had probably even noticed.

Bella put the pen down. “Or are you referring to the moment where Nate eye-fucked you so hard that I started sweating?”

“Bella!” I never got used to her using the F-word. Never. It just sounded wrong coming out of her Disney princess face.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

She shrugged then grinned. “Sorry. There is just literally no other phrase in the English language that covers how he was staring at you.”

I shook my head quickly and took off my jacket. “Editing,” I insisted. “He was actually looking at one of the dancers. Anyway,” I brushed my hands together, desperate for a subject change, “why are you here instead of doing your own work?” I thought back to Nate’s remarks about Bella’s uncharacteristic procrastination. “Don’t you have some sort of big launch coming up soon? Shouldn’t you be working on that?”

She sighed, and I saw the strain from Nate’s face appear on hers. “Yeah. Probably. No, definitely.”

Bella put a hand high on her stomach, over her rib cage, the same way she did that September of our junior year in high school when we’d learned the December date the SAT test would be proctored. She’d known the scores she’d need for a scholarship as well as the high expectations everyone held. I’d figured she’d barricade herself in her bedroom with a stack of SAT prep books, but for the next month, she found any excuse not to study. She’d babysit for the neighbors, run unnecessary household errands, do yardwork for hours.

This must be the same kind of thing. She was so stressed from the pressure of her upcoming software launch that she was procrastinating by throwing herself wildly into the Christmas Village and Single Bells.

In high school, she eventually ran out of excuses and snapped back to reality and those SAT prep books. I was sure the same thing would happen now; the crazy antics

of winter Falworth would eventually drive her back to her launch.

In fact, I'd speed it along. "I'm here now, so please leave. I'll close up."

She opened her mouth. Closed it again. Just leave, Bells.

She stood and slid on her coat. "We should probably start planning Christmas Eve soon," she said quietly.

Ugh, I'd forgotten all about that. I was going to have to cap this month of insanity by spending the holiday with my nemesis in a house I hadn't even been able to drive by since September. "What's to plan?" I said nastily. "I'll show up. We'll drink a quick toast to Greta. Then I'll go to bed."

She looked at me reproachfully, not needing to say the words aloud. That's not what Greta wanted.

Her somber, blue-eyed judgment both shamed me and made me furious. "I don't understand why you're here," the petulant words escaped my mouth. But seriously, even if she'd bitten off more than she could chew with her software product, couldn't she procrastinate in Chicago?

"Why are you back in Falworth for the whole month?" I demanded. "Why are you doing Single Bells? Why did you donate all that money for the Christmas Village when you haven't been here in ages? Greta is gone," I emphasized, making us both wince. "So why are you back?"

Bella wrapped a scarf around her neck, chewing on her lip as though searching for the right words. "I've had an overwhelming couple of months," she said finally. "Along with Greta passing, some things happened that left me really disoriented. I wanted to feel centered again."

She met my eyes. “I wasn’t lying in my firstSingle Bellsconfessional. I really do want to reconnect with my home and—” She paused and her eyes went strangely bright. “And the people here.”

This is not your home anymore,I wanted to shout, ignoring the sheen in her eyes that might have been tears. But now she was shrugging and still talking. “As for the Christmas Village, that’s easy. When I arrived, I called Carol, and she explained the town’s situation. I was recently awarded a lot of money in a lawsuit, so I could afford to help. It’s the least I could do.”

A lawsuit? I almost asked more questions about that, but I didn’t want to give the impression that I cared.

She didn’t seem to want to get into it either. She yawned and wiped her eyes as she pulled her coat on. “See you tomorrow.”

Tomorrow night, the web series dates were all taking place at one location: the bowling alley. We’d thought it would be a great visual: each couple would bowl in an adjoining lane. It would also be a series-wide competition—the couple who got the best combined score would win some sort of prize.

Michael was in a bowling league, so he and Bella would be solid contenders. They actually used to go bowling on a lot of dates in high school, so this would be a sweet little walk down memory lane for them.

For him at least.

“What are you doing with Michael?” I asked Bella before she could walk out of the door. “This is just a holiday visit for you. A whim. But this is Michael’s actual life. He’s going to be devastated when you leave. Again,” I emphasized.

She paused and then the door slammed behind her, a whisper on the wind I must have misheard. “Maybe I won’t leave.”

I spent some time at the shop, staying open a few hours late and netting quite a few sales when the Christmas Village closed and tourists were heading back to their Airbnbs and motel rooms. In between ringing up six-packs, peppermint schnapps, and cheap bottles of bourbon, I examined my various savings accounts and what kind of loan it would take for me to buy Bella’s half of the shop.

The whole exercise put me in a bad mood. Was she having some sort of early mid-life crisis? Why would she even consider moving back here when her life was so perfect? No. She was just caught up in the whirlwind right now. Basking in the town’s joy at her homecoming and in the glow of a little vacation romance. Once that all wore off, she’d be on her way yet again.

The thought made my stomach ache a bit as I drove home. Just remnants of past hurt, I assured myself. Just the memory of how abandoned eighteen-year-old Jane felt at the moment Bella left and all those early years when the promises we’d made were broken and all the plans we’d made never came to fruition and all the dreams I’d had just faded into normal life. Memories were powerful, and it was natural that seeing her again would churn up the old gut.

But I had a strong protective layer to me; Michael did not. I could tell from watching all those hours of footage. He thought Bella was back for a reason, and that the reason might be him. He thought they were starting a real thing. A rough January is in store for you, my friend.

I turned my truck into my apartment building parking lot and braked. Nate was outside in a ski jacket, just looking up at the stars in the black sky.

Sighing loudly, I parked several spots away from him. Why had I suggested my own

apartment building? Why did he have to be outside? I didn't want to see him in person. His face, now open and wondering as he admired the night sky, looked completely different than the man captured in that riveting moment at The Satin Lady.

"J-Bird," he said softly, his voice again dwarfed by the night. Was this a thing with him? Did he lower his voice when walking down the evening streets in Chicago too? Or was this only part of his Falworth brand?

Clearly, I'd never find out.

I sniffed at him in greeting and slammed my car door.

"Rough day?" he asked, taking his full attention from the stars and turning it on me.

"Irritating at best," I said shortly. And the key cause of that irritation was standing right in front of me.

He raised his eyebrows, inviting me to continue. But what was the point? I didn't want to get used to having someone to vent to or commiserate with. Not someone who was only temporary anyway. I didn't want to watch his eyes glaze with boredom as I tried to explain my financial predicament with Greta's shop or any part of my complicated relationship with Bella. How I was worried about Michael's feelings too.

Speaking of... "You know, we haven't been very successful at 'hatching schemes,'" I said.

His eyebrows lowered into a frown. "I suppose not."

"I've seen Bella's car here in the mornings." I waved my arms around the parking lot. "So I suppose trying to alter the date pairings doesn't matter to you anymore if you and Bella have been able to establish a morning work schedule."

His frown lines grew deeper. "Does it matter to you?"

The air between us was changing, and I didn't understand how or why. It was like my

clear irritation had sparked some of his own, and now there was a sort of electric current between us. A kind of unstable energy that wasn't quite safe.

I'd also sort of lost the thread of what we were discussing. Oh right—our initial scheme to make mischief between the sweethearts. “Yes,” I said on principle. “I mean, my feelings haven't changed.”

He snorted at me and took a half step closer. “Feelings? J-Bird, you have no feelings for Michael. Not really. I suspect that keeping Bella and Michael apart was a spiteful way of getting back at Bella for something, and that it had nothing really to do with the man himself. I've seen no evidence that you particularly care for him. Or even that you fancy him.”

His words stung, like a strong antiseptic pad being pressed to a reopened wound. How the hell would he know what I did or didn't “fancy” anyway? “You've seen no evidence?” I mocked in a half-baked British accent. “What great investigative tool have you been using to compile this evidence, might I ask?”

“My own eyes,” he said drily.

Why had we both just taken a step closer to one another? I could hear him just fine from where he was.

“Let's talk about those eyes,” I said, wild and breathless. “I watched the second episode. The footage of you from *The Satin Lady*.” There was a lot of Nate in that episode, but I was guessing he knew exactly the ten seconds I was referring to.

Nate abruptly dropped his gaze from my face to the ground. Mumbled something I couldn't understand. Squeezed his hands into fists before relaxing them.

“What did you say?” I demanded.

He rolled his eyes back to the stars. “I didn’t know I was being recorded. At that moment.”

It’s not that I didn’t trust Sean, but... “Were you looking at me like that?” Suddenly my voice was quiet too.

Nate’s eyes lowered from the heavens to my face. His expression shifted away from embarrassment as his eyelids lowered a centimeter and his jaw shifted.

Why was my breathing so shallow? Why was I focusing so much on the bottom half of his face?

“Are you familiar with the term competence porn, Jane?” he asked.

I was so distracted by his use of my actual name and how his night-quiet voice had gotten all roughed up and gravelly that it took me a moment to grasp his actual question. Before I realized I didn’t grasp it at all. “Huh?”

“Competence porn—” he paused to cock his jaw in the opposite direction and take a half step closer to me “—is when a viewer takes great enjoyment in watching someone do something well. Marveling at someone who is insanely good at something.”

I blinked a few times, confused and mesmerized. My lips formed into the shape they needed to make a W sound, but I couldn’t think of the right question to ask him. What does this have to do with me? When did you get so close?

“You fix things and make things and solve situations,” Nate all but whispered. “You order people around, and they do what you say.” He shook his head, as if in bewilderment. “There hasn’t been a problem you couldn’t solve.”



He might have looked frustrated if he didn't look so...intent. "I've always been a bit of a sucker for competence porn, but I've never seen it embodied so much in one individual." Those intense dark eyes became fixated on my parted lips. "So I didn't know how apt the term actually was."

"Let me get this straight." I took a shuddering breath, so warm in my thin coat that I wondered how I could have felt cold earlier. "You're turned on because I'm so competent?" This might have been the oddest conversation I'd ever had with a man. A very odd, veryhotconversation.

His lips quirked up at the corners. "It surprises me too."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

We were now only separated by inches, and his face was exactly as it had been in the video. Hungry. His gaze made my mouth water, and we were both breathing so hard that our breath made little white clouds around our faces.

I should have been backing away. I should have been rolling my eyes. But his eyes had their own gravity again, and their magnetic force was pulling my mouth to his.

“This is so stupid,” I whispered.

“I know,” he agreed.

His lips touched mine, and there was nothing chaste or sweet or mistletoe-friendly about this kiss. It wasn't a peck and it wasn't gentle. He kissed me hard, and I pushed back, just as ravenous, completely surrendering to the stupid. How could I not when his hands came to my jaw and tilted my face so his mouth could go deeper, devouring mine? How could I resist when he tasted so, so good?

No, this wasn't a tentative, getting-to-know-one-another kind of kiss. It was an open-mouthed, straining to get-inside-one-another kind of kiss.

I went up on my tiptoes and half-climbed him while one of his arms went around my back and tried to haul me up higher against him, which moved us several feet in one direction toward his car.

We stumbled against his vehicle, and he whirled me around so that I was pressed up against it. Grateful for the steady structure, I dropped my hands from his neck and shoved them inside his coat, running them up outside of his shirt, feeling the hard

muscles of his back, pulling him even tighter to me.

He groaned in the back of his throat and licked into me even deeper. My whole self was on fire, from the hair follicles on my head to the tips of my pinkie toes. My thigh muscles were clenching, wishing his hips were already between them. Skin, my brain insisted, and so I slid my hands under his shirt, scratched his bare back with my fingernails.

He gasped against my mouth, and then one of his hands was inside my coat, inside my shirt, sliding toward my breast. I arched my back against the car and bit his lip, willing those hands to get to their destination. I wanted them everywhere on my body and now.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd made out with someone like this. Couldn't remember this kind of clawing, moaning, dirty-in-the-good-way kind of kissing. Had I ever been this primed for release? A release that seemed ridiculously imminent.

Headlights on the road. A car approaching from town. The sound of tires on gravel. I recognized the squeak of Sean's broken car radiator.

I broke our kiss, dropping my hands from his back and shoving at Nate's shoulders. He backed away immediately, unpinning me from the car.

We stared at one another. He looked just as shocked as I felt.

The second Sean's headlights swung in from the road, I sprinted to my front door. It took an embarrassing ten seconds for me to get the keys in the lock, and I pictured Nate watching me fumble.

He didn't say a word, not that I was exactly expecting him to. I wasn't quite sure what my answer would have been if he'd said, "Can I come in?" or "Come to mine?"

in that quiet, night whisper.

I slammed the door behind me and pressed a hand to my swollen lips. Across the room, Bruce lifted his head. “What the hell was that?” I said aloud.

## Chapter Eleven

Friday, December 12—Single Bells—Date 3—Bowling Alley

Pairings:

Bella and Michael

Nicole and Jim

Diane and Brian

Mabel and Tripp

Jane and Nate

Carol was stringing Christmas lights at the bowling alley when Sean and I arrived early to set up the camera equipment. It was a good idea because the interior of the alley was typically as festive as a parking lot.

Not that I was thinking about parking lots.

“Do you ever rest?” I hollered up at her. She’d already worked a full day at the diner, which had been busting at the seams when I’d driven by.

“I’ll sleep in January,” she called back, and I nodded wryly. Same.

Sean waved to the other cameramen, gathered by the bar. “At least tonight will be really easy to film.” He pointed to the six bowling lanes. “Are you going to assign lanes to particular couples?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

I'd given it quite a bit of thought. "Bella, Michael, Nicole, and Jim are all good bowlers. Since there's an element of competition to tonight's event, let's put them on lanes one and two, next to each other. One of them will win for sure, so let's make sure they can see the competition. Keep a camera on each of those couples all night, because they're still our main stories."

Pointing to lane three, I said, "Put Diane and Brian there. Diane will enjoy functioning as a color commentator on the rest of the pairings and dates tonight, so if she's right in the middle, she can see everyone."

I liked the idea of putting Diane and Brian next to Mabel and Tripp. I could have been imagining it, but there'd been something between Mabel and Brian on their last date. If they were in adjacent lanes they could still talk to one another.

"Nate and I will go in lane five," I said to Sean. Lane five was right next to the bar, so it would be noisy and distracting and full of other people. It wouldn't be like being on a date at all. We probably wouldn't even be able to hear one another. Which was just fine by me.

I went into the bathroom and checked my appearance in the mirror. For the camera, of course. I didn't care what I looked like for Nate. Case in point: tonight I wore a simple fitted black T-shirt and old faded jeans. Nothing special. Not one thing.

Sighing, I pulled a tube of red lipstick out of my pocket and worked on my mouth, giving a nice bright contrast to my curtain of dark hair.

Fine. One thing.

When the tenSingle Bellsparticipants had all gathered and completed their confessionals, Diane explained the competition: “We’ll all bowl three games. Highest combined score for each couple wins that round. Whichever couple wins the most rounds gets bragging rights and a cash prize!” We all cheered dutifully, even though we knew the cash prize was about twenty bucks.

Diane clapped her hands. “To your assigned lanes, everyone, and may the best couple win!”

Bella and Michael strode confidently to lane one, heads together and talking animatedly. Amused, I watched theirconcentration as they tried out different bowling balls. I’d forgotten how competitive they both could be. Should be good TV if Jim and Nicole gave them a run for the money.

Jim and Nicole were already settled in their lane with their balls and a pitcher of beer. Nicole was chewing on her lip uncertainly, glancing between her ex and the camera while Jim sat with his back turned, doggedly setting up their electronic scoreboard.

“I see we’re poised for drama,” a British accent quipped behind me.

My heart gave an annoying and unreasonablebang!in my chest, and I inwardly cringed at myself. So we’d had a little weird moment the night before. It was a mistake between strangers and it meant nothing. It was just...an anomaly driven by hormones, and nothing about that encounter would linger or be repeated. A bowling alley was about the least sexy place I could think of anyway.

I closed my eyes for a bracing moment, then turned to face Nate with a determinedly bland expression. “Hey.”

“J-Bird,” he greeted me with an equally manufactured bland expression—which immediately morphed into something very different as his dark eyes zeroed in on my

bright red mouth.

Oh no.

The unstable energy I'd sensed last night before our moment of insanity hadn't vanished at all. It sparked between us now, much stronger, almost visible to the naked eye, and apparently undeterred by the usual arousal-killing power of clownlike shoes and bowling alley aromas.

Did he feel it too?

I watched as he dragged his gaze up from my mouth, his pupils dilated and shoulders stiff. My lips curved before I could order them not to. Oh yes, he felt it.

I cleared my throat. "Lane five. Let's go."

I marched in front of him, grabbed a bowling ball that was way too heavy, just to have something to do. Good God, I could feel him prowling behind me. When I glanced back, he was staring at my butt. I fought the urge to preen, even as I remembered the cameras everywhere. God only knew what they were recording.

We reached our lane, and he went to get us a pitcher of beer as I efficiently set up the electronic scoring. The bar was nowhere near as busy or loud as I'd hoped. Conversation was going to be necessary after all.

Nate returned, filled us both a plastic cup of light beer from the pitcher, and offered one to me. "Cheers." In silence, we sat, drank from our cups and watched one another. Like me, he was just wearing jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Nothing special.

Except...I knew how his back muscles felt underneath that T-shirt. I'd had my



fingernails all over them.

“Did I put scratches on your back?”

“You did,” he confirmed, his voice dropping an octave. “It stung in the shower.”

The stall in his apartment was exactly the same as mine, so my mental image was probably pretty close to reality. I wanted to see his hair wet and pushed back, water droplets in his eyelashes, streams of water dripping down his naked chest—

“Stop,” he growled. “For fuck’s sake, Jane.”

“What?” Dazed, I shook my head and blinked a few times. “Stop what?”

“Looking at me like that,” he said through clenched teeth. Discreetly, he shifted his weight on the chair. “We’re supposed to be bowling, and if you keep looking at me like that, I won’t be able to stand up.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

With supreme effort, I managed not to look at the area of his body currently causing him distress. I licked my lips and flicked my hand between us. “This is weird.” His eyes snagged on my fingers, as if even they held some sort of erogenous appeal.

“Indeed.” He sighed and shifted his weight again. “Bloody inconvenient as well.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. He was always so self-assured and implacable. Seeing him uncomfortable was just fun. But maybe I’d take pity on him. “If competence is what makes you so hot and bothered, I have good news.”

I thrust my fingers into the holes on my bowling ball. “I’m an absolutely terrible bowler. A few gutter balls and your lust will be history.”

Nate’s teeth flashed and his laugh filled lane five. “Let’s hope that’s the case, J-Bird.”

I went right ahead and started the game with a gutter ball and got a three on my second turn. Nate fared only slightly better with a total of six. Our second frames went only slightly better. I got a total of seven, Nate eight. “You’re terrible too,” I said.

“I’ve always thought this was the most stupid of sports.” Nate huffed.

He arched an eyebrow at me. “Surprised you’re not better though, as this is one of the only things in this town to do.” He scanned the alley, which was quickly filling with both locals and tourists. A small crowd was forming behind lanes one and two, where I assumed much better bowling was happening.

“I used to come with my mom sometimes when I was really little,” I admitted. “She loved it.” I closed my mouth then, surprised at the memory, and even more surprised the words had escaped in the first place.

“Why did you stop coming? Did she suffer a bowling-related injury?” he teased.

Another gutter ball. A cartoon on the electronic scoreboard made fun of me. I thought of not answering, but it seemed odd to let his question just hang in the air. “My mom is recovering,” I said, glancing to the bottles of vodka at the bar. “When I’m with her, we don’t go places that serve alcohol.”

Well there, that should do it. If my shitty bowling hadn’t already killed the vibe between us, this depressing topic certainly would.

Nate paused midstride, the bowling ball falling to his side. “That must have been difficult,” he said softly. “Dealing with that kind of illness when you were a child.”

I met his eyes, taken aback by the sincerity in his voice—and his choice of words. A lot of people around here didn’t think of addiction as an illness. A lot of people thought of it as a moral weakness or character flaw.

“I was lucky. Through most of her bad times, I lived with Greta—Bella’s grandmother,” I explained when he looked confused. Although, I hated that descriptor. Greta might not have been my blood relation, but she was mine too. “When I got old enough and I had the money to help my mom, I did.”

Nate opened his mouth, but Diane had appeared at our lane, and I turned gratefully to them.

“Goodness,” Diane said, eyeing our scoreboard. “You two are certainly in last place.”

“Shocking,” Nate said.

“Bella and Michael have won the first round,” she announced. “But only by two pins over Jim and Nicole. My money’s on them for the second game.”

I looked over to lane one, where Bella and Michael were giving each other an ecstatic high five. Bella’s cheeks were bright pink, and Michael gestured wildly at the scoreboard with his cup of beer. He whooped again loudly. Next to me, Nate frowned. “He is much too excited about this. They both are.”

In lane two, Jim and Nicole’s heads were close together. He was looking into her eyes while she nodded and smiled. “Is Jim’s hand on Nicole’s hip?” I asked Diane out of the side of my mouth.

She winked at me. “It seems that being on a team together is something they’d forgotten they were rather good at.”

I took a moment to check on our other couples. Tripp was looking at his phone, while Mabel and Brian talked across their lanes. Hmmm. Could just be a friendship forming, but if I was Brian’s ex and I was still interested, I’d be getting a little nervous.

Diane sauntered away, the camera capturing her running commentary on the state of play. “Better luck on game two!”

“Let’s do something different,” Nate said suddenly. He grabbed his ball and went to the head of the lane. But instead of rolling it the normal way, he turned so he was facing me, his back to the pins. Then he spread his legs wide and bent over and rolled the ball between them.

His ball moved slowly down the lane but much straighter than when he’d rolled it the

normal way. So straight, in fact, that it mowed down eight pins. I jumped to my feet and clapped. “That might have been your best roll yet!”

“Your turn—same way. Backward and through the legs,” he announced.

And that’s how we played our entire second game. Each frame we took turns coming up with a new way to throw the ball. In the sixth frame, right-handed Nate got an honest-to-goodness strike when he bowled with his left hand. We cheered so loudly even the intensely focused Bella and Michael looked over. In the eighth, I bowled with my eyes closed and threw my ball into the next lane and hit Tripp in the ankle. Nate laughed so hard I worried he’d pee his pants.

Jim and Nicole won the second game by three pins over Bella and Michael. The four of them were so much better than everyone else that the rest of us decided to forego the third game in order to watch the tie-breaker match between lanes one and two.

Flush from our own unconventional game, Nate and I watched as Michael rubbed Bella’s shoulders, giving her an inspirational pep talk for the third game. Jaws clenched and eyes narrowed, they looked like boxers headed into a fight with a zillion-dollar prize and hefty new belt. “How can two such attractive people be so competitive about this weird game?” Nate wondered aloud.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

I didn't know. "In our post-date confessionals, we should say that as punishment for being so obnoxious, they should be paired with other people for the next date."

Nate tapped his cup against mine. "Deal."

The rest of the contestants settled at highboy tables behind lanes one and two. Sean and the rest of the camera crew had positioned themselves at evenly spaced intervals around the two lanes. I spotted two open stools at the back of the crowd, but to my surprise, Nate jerked his head toward the bar. "Want to go over there and talk? Or are you invested in this showdown?"

I paused. Bit my lip. I didn't care much about the bowling, but I wasn't sure it'd be smart to go off alone with Nate either. We'd had fun bowling, of course, but what if the lighthearted laughs transitioned back into that zinging, sparking, dangerous lust?

"No pressure," he said, yawning. "I was just thinking it'd be nice to not have to worry about a camera in my face for a few minutes." Oooh, that did sound good.

"Lead the way," I said.

We bellied up to the bar. Nate ordered an old-fashioned, and I switched to club soda. Had to keep my wits about me. The bartender slid Nate's drink across the bar, and I watched as he took his first swallow. Laughed aloud, hard, when his eyes watered and his facial expression turned bewildered.

He made a motion to call back the bartender, who was pulling drafts for other customers. "He made me the wrong drink." He eyed his glass suspiciously. "This is

not whiskey.”

A snort escaped. “It isn’t whiskey, but he didn’t make you the wrong drink.”

Nate raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, Jane. Even if you are a part-time bartender, I’ll have to argue with you on this one. An old-fashioned is made with whiskey.”

I gave him a huge grin. “Not in Wisconsin. A Wisconsin Old-Fashioned is made with brandy.”

He gaped at me. “I’m sorry? The state of Wisconsin is just allowed to make one of the most classic of all cocktails differently?”

“Yup.” I tapped a few keys on my phone and showed it to him. “If you don’t believe me, believe Google.”

He scanned through a few articles and then gave the drink in front of him a considering expression. “Here I am, drinking the most authentic Wisconsin beverages of all, just like a local. Yay me.”

I wrinkled my nose. I rarely drank spirits at all and found brandy to be particularly nasty. “I doubt you’ll be saying ‘yay me’ after a few more sips.”

He took another swallow. “Ugh, you may be right.” He sniffed at the brandy and shuddered. “Just...why? Why is this?”

I had to laugh. “European immigrants to Wisconsin,” I said, matter-of-factly. “Long ago, when they emigrated, they brought their taste for brandy along with them. Mostly Germans.”

Nate stared at me for a beat too long. “Why is it so sexy that you know things like

that?” he muttered into his drink. I squirmed on my stool and drained my club soda. Me knowing things had never been sexy to anyone before.

Nate shook his head slightly as if admonishing himself. “Tell me about the shop,” he said after taking another tiny sip of his drink and wincing. “Bella said something about it the other day while we were working. You guys co-inherited it from her grandmother or something?”

I chewed on my straw, leaving angry bite marks. “Yeah. Greta ran the shop for the last fifty years. It’s been a town institution forever. Before Walmart and the Piggly Wiggly, it was one of the only places in the area to get booze. Thirty years ago, all the area restaurants used her as a distributor too.” I sighed. “Most of that’s changed now, which is why the business isn’t doing well. Beer’s a lot cheaper at the big-box stores. Greta was wonderful at choosing good wine at good prices, but—” I gestured around “—this is more of a beer and liquor town.”

I stabbed at the ice in my cup. “I’ve helped in the shop on and off for more than ten years. In the last two, Greta really started to slow down, so I was there a lot.” I put down the glass because my throat was starting to hurt. “She got sick at the end of last winter, so I’ve been mostly running it since then.”

Nate picked up his glass and moved it in circles. We both watched the brown liquid swirl around the ice cubes and muddled fruit. “Are you angry with Greta for not leaving it to you outright? Because you contributed so much time to it?”

I had to appreciate the blunt and ballsy question. I hadn’t let myself think about it in that way before. Being angry with Greta was not an emotion I was comfortable with. “A little,” I admitted. “I’m mostly frustrated, though, about the situation. She should have just left it to me or she should have left it to Bella. This sharing thing is a nightmare.”



“Hmm.” He swirled his drink again. Then, out of left field: “You should let Bella buy you out.”

What the—? Eyes blazing, I dropped my glass on the bar with a loudthunk. “Why would you say that? Bella hasn’t been part of that shop for the last decade! Bella hasn’t stressed over the books until her eyes crossed. Bella hasn’t dusted betweenbottles of old wine until her sinuses went bonkers. Bella hasn’t spent every Easter weekend doing inventory prep for summer.” I swiped a hand across my nose. “It hasn’t been herhomelike it’s been mine.”

Nate looked at me, lips parted, like a question was lodged there that I wasn’t going to like.Good. Swallow it back down.

But he didn’t. “Is the shop still your home, though, without Greta?” he asked softly.

In my chest, my heart suddenly felt funny. As though a fist was around it, crushing it.

I should have wanted to slap him. Or slosh his own drink across his face. But maybe I was too tired for anger, because all I really felt was...hurt. Honest-to-goodnesshurt. Weight on my chest, ice shards in my throat, and a strange, unmoored sensation. Like I’d become untethered from the world.

“Why would you say such a painful thing?” I whispered. Thank Christ there were no cameras around, because my vision was blurred with tears. Why would he make my home seem so tenuous?

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

His eyes widened, and he went pale. I must have really look wrecked. “God, Jane, I’m sorry. I’m an idiot.”

It took an embarrassingly long two minutes of silence before I felt normal enough to look up from my lap. What would happen if I just left the bowling alley right now? Went home, got into my beautiful bed, and hid from the world. I could deal with the dumb web series fallout tomorrow, couldn’t I? When I was back to normal?

“I can see that I’ve wounded you. Can I explain my boneheaded statement?” Nate asked quietly. Quiet in the way he was while worshipping the night sky.

What the hell? I moved my shoulders up and down.

“As you, ahem, now know, I’ve been watching you. Almost from the moment I arrived,” he admitted. I glanced up, surprised. He met my gaze steadily; the tip of his left ear was pink. The right was not. Interesting quirk.

“I have a sense of you, as a person,” he explained. “Possibly it’s wrong, but my track record on reading people is quite good. In my mind, I have cataloged you as a problem-solver, a hands-on learner. A person who doesn’t like routine. A person who would prefer to take on new challenges all the time instead of performing the same kind of tasks every day.”

That wasn’t totally wrong. Even though I didn’t have a college degree, a lot of basic office or hospitality jobs in the area would have hired me. Of my limited options, I chose to do things like the Geek Squad because every day was a little different and I did get presented with new problems to solve every day. Although I didn’t love

waitressing or bartending, I chose that over being a bank teller or working at the post office because there was more variety in the shifts.

“I can see you being interested in running a small business,” he went on. “But after a decade, I would doubt there’s much new to be learned at Greta’s shop, and I guess I just thought it might not be very fulfilling for you. You might be bored.” A ghost of a mischievous smile on those lips. “Something tells me that you’re not very pleasant when you’re bored.”

That part was exactly right. Hell hath no fury like a bored Jane.

He put his hand a few inches over mine, like he was considering touching me. But then he moved it away. “I can see now, though, that it was much too flippant a comment about a place so closely related to someone you deeply loved.” His fingers curled into a fist. “I hate that I put that devastated look on your face. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right. I’m not mad,” I said truthfully, meeting his concerned eyes. “You didn’t even say anything that wasn’t true.” I shut my eyes for a moment, just kind of sick of everything. “It’s hard to explain the emotional impact of walking away though.”

Walking away was not something that I did.

I didn’t want to get into the rest with him, but there was more. Beyond the emotional attachment was my practical plan to improve my life—the one Greta had set into motion. Running her store was pivotal; it gave me meaningful work and a strong foothold in the Falworth community. Nate may have understood, but it was just too embarrassing to explain that I was trying to improve my life to someone so successful. Someone who had his own life so perfectly together.

Cheers erupted from the bowling spectators, and we glanced over to see the

contenders in each other's arms. Michael had his arm around Bella's shoulders, but I couldn't tell if it was another pep talk or if he was comforting her after a missed strike shot. In lane two, however, Jim and Nicole were full-on hugging—he'd lifted her off the ground and swung her in a complete circle, her head thrown back with laughter.

That was reality gold.

They were halfway through the game, so we still had five frames to go. I asked the bartender for more club soda and a bunch of lime slices. Nate was still fighting his way through the brandy old-fashioned, his mouth puckering more at the corners with each sip. "It's time to talk about you," I announced.

"Oh?" He quirked an eyebrow.

"Definitely," I annunciated. "You come swinging into town, and I incorrectly assumed you were Bella's boyfriend. I've had a dozen conversations with you since then." My lips formed a thoughtful pout. "I still know basically nothing about you, except a little bit about your job and that you're also from a small town."

I lowered my voice. "Generally, I like to know more about the people who ravish me in parking lots." His eyes went dark, and his gaze shot to my lips. A little lust zing sparked in my stomach. How was this happening again? After he almost made me cry, I shouldn't still be so focused on the details of the night before. "I mean, I know somethings about you." How his tongue moved inside my mouth, for example. Or the feel of his knuckles against my bare stomach.

"Don't," he said in that strangled voice. "Don't start that again." His eyes went between me and the coat room. Between me and the men's bathroom. Between me and the crevice between the pinball machine and the wall.

Hell, it looked like he was trying to find a private place to drag me and pick right up where we left off last night. “What are you thinking about right now?” I asked suspiciously.

“You know exactly what I’m thinking.” His voice was so gruff I wanted to purr.

I pulled my T-shirt away from my sweating body a few times, willing the stale alley air to cool me off. It did not work. All it did was pull his eyes from my lips down to my tiny bit of cleavage.

“Right.” I cleared my throat. “We’re talking about you now.” All on their own, my lids lowered. “Not about how your lips feel though. Or how the side of your neck tastes. Or how strong your hands are. Or—”

“Keep talking, J-Bird,” he hissed, eyes practically black, a muscle ticking in the corner of his jaw. “I’m fairly certain this bowling alley has a parking lot as well.”

I swallowed a hysterical giggle, so turned on by turning him on that I couldn’t stop bouncing up and down in my seat. But if I got us any more wound up, I was pretty sure we would end up in the parking lot and Diane or one of the cameramen would be sure to notice if we disappeared altogether.

“So you were born in a small town,” I summarized, pulling myself together. “To married parents?”

He nodded, eyes downshifting from horny to amused.

“Siblings?”

He cringed. “Indeed.”

Why the grimace? “How many?”

He blew out a long breath. “Seven.”

“You’re joking.” My jaw was practically on the bar. “Seriously?”

“Dead serious.” Nate sighed. “I’m one of eight. Fifth of eight, actually, in birth order.”

Whoa. Even with just Greta, Bella, and me full-time, our mothers in and out, the house was still lively. I couldn’t imagine adding so many more people to the mix. “What was that like?” I asked, genuinely enthralled.

“Chaotic,” Nate confirmed. “Our house was always full and loud. When I was really young, there was always a baby crying or a toddler spilling something. When I got older, the door was always opening and slamming as we went to school or sports practices or out with the neighbor kids.”

His voice was a little careful, a little too neutral. “Was it chaotic in a good way or a bad way?” I pressed.

The tip of his right ear went pink again. “There were good things about it,” he allowed. “There was always someone around. It was never lonely.”

“But...” I led.

He took a gulp of his drink, not flinching this time. Maybe the brandy was growing

on him. “But it was also...unruly,” he said, not smiling for once. “My parents weren’t exactly interested in being parents—the kind who enforced rules or established bedtimes or even made sure there was food for everyone.” He sighed. “They didn’t mind having all these children about, as long as they didn’t actually have to manage them.”

I could feel the line forming between my brows. Greta had been loving and kind, but she’d also been ultra-conscientious and strict as hell. Bella and I had never gone to school without a packed lunch or signed permission slips. In high school, we’d had the earliest curfews of anyone we knew. Maybe we hadn’t loved it at the time, but the structure had been important. We never doubted that someone really cared what was going on with us.

I bit my lip and followed up on the most concerning tidbit he’d leaked. “Sometimes there wasn’t enough food for everyone?”

He shook his head quickly. “Oh, I didn’t mean we were on the verge of poverty or anything like that. After I turned ten, there were just a lot of times when my mom would throw up her hands at the older children and say, ‘Figure out something for your own dinner, rascals,’ and shoo us out of the house.”

I made sure my expression stayed calm, although my eyes wanted to widen. Fending for one’s own dinner at ten years old? Yikes. I think he sensed my concern anyway because he gave me a practiced grin. Not his real one; his eyes didn’t crinkle and his teeth didn’t flash. “No worries. It made me crafty, that’s all.” Now, he winked at me. “It’s probably why I’m so interested in hatching schemes.”

I didn’t smile back at him. I didn’t want to make light of these minor insights into his personality. In fact, I wanted to go deeper. The tiny pieces I knew about Nate knitted together in my mind. The little boy who’d needed to fend for himself, the adult who cared deeply about his work.

“Do you think that’s why you run your own business?” I found myself asking. “You didn’t have a lot of control when you were little so you like to have a lot of it now?”

Nate stilled on the barstool next to me. After a long pause, he answered. “Probably. I worked for a tech marketing company for several years to learn, but I was always anxious when I had a manager or teammate who seemed lazy. Ilovetworking for myself. Being able to make all the decisions, right or wrong. I can work as hard as I want. I control the outcome.”

He huffed a laugh and looked at me out of the side of his eye. “I’d never really thought of my tendencies as having directly stemmed from my unruly childhood before though. Well done, J-Bird.”

I decided to lighten the mood. “Well, as you said, I am a part-time bartender, and I can tell you that life revelations often accompany the Wisconsin Old-Fashioned.”

He snort-laughed at that, his shoulders relaxing.

I was still a little hung up on the eight kids thing, though. “Did having so many siblings make you want a really big family of your own?” I asked. I often wondered how my unusual family situation growing up might shape choices I would make in the future, but I’d never talked about it with anyone. At least not since Bella and I had stopped speaking.

“No,” he said—quickly and definitively.

He gave me his quick grin, the real one. “When there’s eight kids, there’s not enough time or attention for any one of them. It’s hard to be special when you’re always one of a crowd. It’s hard to feel seen.”

“Is that the reason you left your town?” It was hard for me to imagine Nate not being



seen. But maybe that was just because he stood out so much here. Or maybe he would stand out to me anywhere.

Ugh, where did that semi-sappy thought come from? Just the lust. Just the physical chemistry. Hormones were no joke.

“It’s one reason, anyway,” he said, finishing his drink. “Many of my siblings left, but no one else went quite as far.”

“Did leaving work?” I wondered. “Do you feel more seen?”

He stared at me again, the corners of his mouth turning up thoughtfully and his brow crinkling, like no one had ever asked him this question before. “I certainly see myself more,” he said slowly. “It took a while, too. To function as an individual and not part of the massive Wright family unit. To not constantly consider nine other people into every decision I made. But I got there.”

Hmmm. That wasn’t exactly an answer to the question I’d asked, but it was a more interesting thing to say. Something I already knew I would think about later. How did I see myself? Would I look different to myself if I were somewhere else?

“What is your life in Chicago like?” I asked eagerly. It was an overly broad question, but I wanted to hear everything: his typical work schedule, where his apartment was located, if he was more of a sports events guy or concert guy. Was he an experimental foodie, or did he order the same chicken pad thai from the corner takeout place every other night? Did he like seeing movies in theaters? Did he ever buy tickets to plays or musicals? Or did he mostly hang out in bars? Did he have a big group of casual friends or just one or two close ones? What did he do for exercise? There were some very nice muscles along his abdomen that didn’t come from being a couch potato.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“When this—” he waved between us and the rest of the Single Bells contestants and camera crew “—is over, you should come for a visit and see,” he said.

I wrinkled my nose, feeling an odd mixture of disappointment and elation. It was kind of him to extend the invitation, but that was just empty-promise nonsense. Despite his current spark of interest in me, I knew how these things went. Once he returned to his real life, I’d just become part of a memory: a silly thing he did one holiday.

He sensed my dismissal and doubled down. “I’m serious.”

I patted his stubbly cheek condescendingly. “Sure you are, cutie.”

Ignoring his frown, I glanced over my shoulder at the bowling crew. Eighth frame and the scores were neck and neck. All of the beer pitchers around our contestants were empty.

“Hey!” I called the nearest waitress. “Get some refills over there. There will be celebrating and commiserating in a few minutes. Beverages will be necessary.” She nodded and hurried to comply.

I stretched my arms over my head and cracked my neck. “We should grab one of the cameramen and make them stand on the bar to get a different angle for the tenth frame,” I said, frowning down at my watch.

“You’re doing it again,” Nate said through clenched teeth.

Huh? I blinked at him. I hadn’t said anything teasing or playfully dirty.

“Being competent,” he bit out.

And his eyes were dark and intense again, staring at my mouth and neck. Which was all it took for my body to become warm and sensitive along every inch of skin. Even imagining his fingertips on something as innocuous as my wrist was enough to turn my breathing shallow.

“You’re ridiculous,” I informed him, licking my dry lips and fighting the urge to fan myself.

“What’s ridiculous,” he growl-whispered, “is the level of detail in the fantasy I’ve had over the past thirty seconds.”

I didn’t breathe, Tell me, but he clearly read the thought in my face.

“If this bar was empty, I’d pick you up and carry you to that highboy.” He nodded to the tall table behind us. “I’d tell you to wrap your legs around my waist. Then I’d pull that shirt over your head, because I’m dying to see what you look like in just your bra. I want my mouth on every inch of—”

“I ordered the refills!” the beaming waitress informed me.

“Thanks,” I snarled at her. It sounded more like “fuck off” and she backed away, eyes wide.

“In lieu of an empty bar,” Nate continued, undeterred, “perhaps we could continue this conversation later tonight. Your place or mine?”

Yes! My body screamed. But my brain rejected the thought of taking this...whatever this was...into my actual home. Home was for reality, not fantasy.

On its own, my lip curled distastefully. “What?” Nate asked immediately. “What’s wrong? Did I cross a line? Was that too far?”

It wasn’t too far. Hadn’t I been egging him on all night? But I went a little cruel anyway. “Not too far but not too original either. You certainly aren’t the first big-city guy who got bored in Falworth and decided he wanted to bang a townie.”

I expected him to flinch and back away. Or maybe give me wounded eyes. Or look at me like I was a psycho with multiple personalities.

He did none of those things.

He did, however, take an evaluative look at my lifted chin and defensive posture. Then he leaned into me, slowly, inch by inch, giving me plenty of time to move or push him away. Despite all common sense, I didn’t.

Soon he was so close to me that I could feel the faintest impression of his mouth on my earlobe. “I don’t want to ‘bang a townie.’ It’s you, Jane, that I want, and I’d want you in Falworth or Chicago or any other place. I want to take you, specifically you, to bed and make you scream because you like it so much.”

Oh God. Everything inside me went hot and liquid. I drew a quavering breath and made an embarrassing “unh” moan in the back of my throat.

“That’s an excellent start,” he murmured, breath tickling the side of my neck. “I like that sound very much. It’s a perfect prelude to the kind of scream I mentioned.”

Applause erupted at the other end of the alley. Hoots and shouts and stamping and cheering.

Nate pulled away slowly, meeting my eyes. “Later then?”

I nodded.

### Chapter Twelve

“You’re absolutely sure you want to do the rest of the editing yourself?” I asked Sean as he stood to leave my apartment at midnight. “Because I’m happy to help you finish.”

If he needed help editing, I would not be available for a late-night tryst with Nate. Which was clearly the smarter course of action.

Even if my entire body desperately wanted to be available.

“I’ve got it,” Sean said cheerfully, crouching down to give Bruce his usual goodbye pets. Agitated, Bruce wound himself around Sean’s legs and huffed out an anxious bark.

“Another couple of hours and I’ll have the new episode ready to post,” he said. The control freak in me wanted to argue, but his self-confident nod shut down any protest I would have mounted. Sean really seemed to be flourishing in his role, and I didn’t want to take that away from him. I may have bullied him into helping originally, but now? He was enjoying this—and he was doing a great job. I had no idea what Sean’s long-term ambitions were or if he even had long-term ambitions, but maybe this wacky experience would be some sort of résumé-builder for him.

I wondered how tonight’s episode would appeal to Single Bellsfans. Would they roll their eyes at hyper-competitive Bella and Michael? Would they hope that Jim and Nicole were on their way to reconciliation? Hopefully, they weren’t too hungry for footage of me and Nate, because there wasn’t much. Sean and I had interspersed cuts

of our silly bowling antics for comic relief, but luckily none of the cameramen had caught our hot-eyed stares or dirty-talking whispers.

I want to take you, specifically you, to bed and make you scream because you like it so much.

I shivered at the memory, so visibly that Sean straightened up from the dog and asked, “Do you want me to turn up your thermostat on my way out?”

God no. I was still so warm from earlier in the evening. I was already welcoming the blast of frigid night air that would howl in as Sean left. “No thanks. See you in the morning!”

As soon as the door shut behind him, I raced to the mirror. My lipstick was long gone, and it seemed a little ridiculous to put on a fresh coat at this hour. Besides, it would just get all over Nate’s face, wouldn’t it? I fluffed up my hair at the roots and put my nose down my shirt to make sure I didn’t smell as sweaty as I felt.

Then I paced between my kitchen and bedroom eleven times. What did “later” mean? Had we missed our window? Was I supposed to go over to his place? Or had he been watching and listening to see when Sean left so he would know when to come over here?

“This is ridiculous,” I said to Bruce.

Instead of just staring back at me with wise, brown eyes, Bruce whined and scuttled himself backward, lopsided and sideways. I frowned down at him. “You OK, buddy?”

Knock, knock.

Knuckles on wood. A very quiet tapping on the door. So soft that if I hadn't been half expecting them, I wouldn't have heard.

Discretion, then. He wasn't announcing to Sean or anyone else in the building that he was coming over. I certainly appreciated that, but if he delivered on his promise from earlier in the evening, the secret wouldn't be ours for long. These apartments had very thin walls.

I crossed the room in two strides, pulled open the door, and silently gestured him in.

Nate waited until I closed the door again before speaking. "Hey." The cold air from outside clung to his T-shirt. He hadn't bothered to put on a coat for the one-second walk. Maybe he didn't want to. Maybe he was as warm as I was.

"Hey," I returned awkwardly.

Oh God, now that he was actually standing here, in my apartment, how did we regain our momentum from earlier? How did we get back to the place of hot staring and filthy mouths? What if the chemistry had been just a flash in the pan? A moment that had passed us by?

"I brought you something," he said, holding up a padded shipping envelope. "I ordered it for you a couple of days ago, and it was waiting on my doorstep tonight."

He'd ordered something for me? Even before our impromptu make-out session the night before?

I put my hands on my hips and looked down at the package suspiciously. Greta always gave me a gift for my birthday in July, but other than that, I didn't receive many presents.



Of course, maybe this wasn't a gift at all. "What is it?"

"Open it and see, J-Bird," he said. His tone was mocking, and I relaxed. If we weren't in crazy-lust anymore, I'd be happy to fall back into snarky, insulting each other mode.

I took the light package from his hands and tore into it, my eyebrows scrunching together as I pulled out a small bottle. "Fury Sauce?"

He nodded, grinning. "It's my favorite local hot sauce I've found in Chicago. It's from a ramen shop in my neighborhood." He held up a warning finger. "Upon first taste, you're going to think it's not so bad. But then the habanero peppers sneak up on you."

His grin went wry at the edges. "It's a kind of heat that stays with you."

I couldn't fight the delighted smile that broke out over my entire face. He'd brought me hot sauce. He was insinuating that the sneaky heat was likeme.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Suddenly, I was entirely ready to pick up where we'd left off earlier. With kissing. Lots and lots and lots of kissing.

I took a step toward him. My determination must have been all over my face because the grin on his face transitioned into something more serious and intense. He reached out with both hands, and—

Behind me, Bruce let out a horribly familiar sound of distress, and then I heard a soft plop as he fell onto his side.

“Oh shit!” I exclaimed, whirling around, Nate forgotten. “Oh no! Oh, Bru!”

On his side, Bruce twitched into a full-body seizure. His jaw was locked, and I could hear his teeth clanging together as he shook, the terrified and tortured breathing from his nostrils. Acrid foam appeared on his mouth, the metallic scent filling the air of the small room.

“What do we do?” Nate asked quietly, snapping me out of my frozen anguish.

I blinked and jumped into action. “Watch him! Time how long it lasts if you can. I’ve got to—” I dashed into the kitchenette. I pulled his anti-convulsant pills from the cabinet and a carton of vanilla ice cream from the fridge.

With shaking hands, I chopped the pills into small pieces and shoved them into a bowl of ice cream.

“He’s coming out of it,” Nate called. “Just over a minute, it was.”

“OK, my baby,” I crooned, rushing back in with the bowl of ice cream and pills.

Bruce was struggling to get to his feet. When he did, he walked in confused circles, and I gently tried to guide him to the bowl. “He’s blind when he gets out of a seizure,” I whispered. Bruce found the bowl with his nose and took a tentative lick. The licks became faster. I watched like a hawk to make sure he got a few of the pill pieces as well.

“Can you grab his water bowl?” I asked. “And the bowl of soft food? Not the kibble, the soft food. The seizures take a lot out of him, and he’s very hungry and thirsty right after. His jaw is too sore to chew anything hard.” Nate nodded and left for the kitchen, reappearing in ten seconds with both bowls.

Bruce began to pace around the apartment, bumping into the couch and kitchen table legs, although I tried to put myself between his body and obstacles. “He’s disoriented and upset right after,” I said helplessly.

Nate got down on the floor and stroked Bruce, speaking gently. “Well, of course he is.” Bruce leaned into his petting. He must have found the combination of Nate’s deep voice and stroking hands comforting. “Poor lad. There now.”

I examined the ice cream bowl critically. It looked like he’d ingested about one whole pill, and I needed him to take at least two more. One seizure was upsetting and a nightmare to watch, but it wouldn’t be harmful long term. But if Bruce had a cluster-seizure event in which they kept coming and couldn’t stop, that was very dangerous. I’d have to take him to the vet ER—which was thirty miles from here.

“Can you hold him still?” I asked, too worried to be embarrassed by the tears in my voice. “He hates this, but I have to shove a couple of pills down his throat.”

The only other people who’d been around during a Bruce seizure before were my

mom and Sean. They'd both been so traumatized by the experience that they couldn't help. Kelly had fled sobbing to the bathroom, and Sean had turned so white-faced and shaky, I thought I'd have to take him to the ER too. I'd ended up squeezing poor Bru between my knees to give him the medicine.

"Of course," Nate said, no-nonsense. On his knees, he braced Bruce in his arms, both gentle and strong. "We're ready for you."

I pried open Bruce's sore jaw and put two pills at the back of his tongue, held his mouth closed and stroked his neck until I felt him swallow. "I'm so sorry, buddy," I murmured.

Nate released his hold but kept petting him. Kept soothing him. "All right now," he whispered. "You're all right now."

\*

I woke onmy couch around six a.m., feeling massively hungover. I hadn't overindulged in alcohol, but the whole scene with Bruce combined with my overarching exhaustion brought me to a mini-breakdown before bed. I'd treated myself to an extremely rare purging of emotions. The sobbing exorcism took more out of me than just tears and snot. Right now, I had a throbbing headache and scratchy eyeballs.

At least Bruce was doing much better. He was sleeping one foot away from me, between the couch and the coffee table. I could see his breath rising and falling in his soft, furry chest. After the seizure and his hours of manic circular walking in the middle of the night, he'd sleep most of today.

"Poor baby." I stroked his sleeping body. "Not quite how you planned to spend your Friday night, was it?"

Not how I'd planned to spend mine either. Instead of that sweaty, naked, moaning tableau I'd spent much of yesterday daydreaming about, Nate had guided unsteady Bruce safely around the apartment for almost an hour as I'd cleaned the carpet so it didn't smell like that awful metallic foam or the small bit of urine Bruce had released during the seizure.

When it was time for Nate to leave, I didn't even get close to him, even though he deserved the world's biggest, most grateful bear hug. But I didn't want him to smell what I'd been cleaning and associate those scents with me for the rest of his life. "Does he need eyes on him for the rest of the night? We could take turns sleeping," he'd said, worry creasing his forehead. "I can stay."

His earnest offer made my chest ache. The dude had come over for a booty call and ended up smack in the middle of a canine health emergency, complete with near-hysterical, weepy woman owner.

"We're fine," I said firmly. I was unable to salvage the night, but maybe I could still salvage my dignity. "I'll sleep right next to him, just in case. We've been down this road before, and I can tell he's through the worst of it for now." I ushered him to the door swiftly and without meeting his eyes. Like he was an anonymous plumber who'd just unclogged a drain. "Thank you so much. Have a good rest of your night."

Now, I pushed myself to a careful sitting position, wincing at the pinch in my neck. I pulled up my calendar and looked at my schedule for the day. Two Geek Squad appointments before ten this morning, minding the shop for eight hours, and then a bartending shift at the resort this evening. I'd reschedule the appointments. I didn't want to leave Bruce alone. He hadn't seized again during the night, but sometimes the aftershocks came twelve hours later, depending on how his body had processed the pills, how much rest, food, and water he'd gotten, and how anxious he was feeling.

He could hang out at the shop with me today. He loved chilling on the dog bed

behind the register, sniffing at shoppers. If he had a normal-ish day, I'd feel ninety-nine percent confident that another seizure wouldn't occur. If that was the case, I'd check to see if Sean was free tonight and ask him to sit with Bruce while I went on my shift.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

I leaned back against the sofa cushions and sighed. Did everyone feel like some days were just too much to face? The same work, the same people, the same ups, downs, and disappointments. Did everyone sometimes want to just stay home and hide under a blanket? I never gave in to it, but oh, the urge was strong sometimes.

Blowing out a long breath, I rotated my sore neck and shoulders. I needed Advil, and oh God, would I love some coffee. But I'd been so crazy the past couple of weeks that my grocery situation was dire. I'd have to deal with a glass of tap water and a handful of semi-stale dry cereal for breakfast.

Knuckles on the door. Very light tapping.

I froze on the couch. No way in hell was I opening that door. My eyes and nose were swollen and red, and I'd slept in the same clothes I'd worn the night before. My skin was sour from the sweat that came from anxiety nightmares, and I couldn't even think about the state of my breath.

After a moment, I heard a scratching sound as though paper was being dragged down my door. Then, footsteps walking away and a following thud, like a door had been shut. Nate returning to his own apartment.

Vaulting silently off my couch, I tiptoed to the door so that I wouldn't wake up Bruce, and opened it two inches. On the doorstep was a vision of heaven. A large coffee from Carol's diner and two takeout containers, one that smelled like pancakes and bacon.

"Oh my God," I whispered, my empty stomach roaring in joy. I carried the

unexpected delivery into the living room. Bruce lifted his head at the scent of bacon. His vision had returned overnight and now his gaze was fixated on the white takeout container. “We’ll share,” I assured him.

The second container was full of over-easy eggs and breakfast potatoes. With a small, handwritten note: Morning, J-Bird. Try the hot sauce on this. If you dare.

It’s odd how you can feel yourself brightening. The remaining pricks of the headache faded at my temples. My lungs felt full of clean air. My cheeks plumped in a smile as I inhaled the scent of the coffee. Bruce pushed his nose against my calf muscle, his patented “give me that bacon” move.

And, quite abruptly, the day didn’t seem like too much to face anymore.

## Chapter Thirteen

“An emergency council meeting? At eight a.m. on a Sunday morning?” Entering our Single Bells staging area in the Christmas Village, I glared at Carol even as she handed me a hot cup of coffee. “Some of us work nights, you know.” My bartending shift hadn’t ended until after midnight, and I’d been very annoyed to wake up to Carol’s 911 text message at six.

Diane hid a yawn behind her hand. “Put your bark away, Jane. You know Carol wouldn’t call us all together if it wasn’t important.”

Did I know that? Carol had gotten so insane about the Christmas Village, we could be meeting to discuss hot dog inventory.

Michael arrived, carrying two bakery boxes of donuts. At least I’d get another free breakfast out of the deal. “So what’s up, Carol?” Michael said, with a much friendlier tone than I’d offered.



Carol's gaze was on the door. It opened again, and she nodded. "Good, we're all here now." Frowning, I turned around, and my mood took another hit. Carol had been waiting for Bella to arrive. Why was Bella attending council meetings? She shouldn't be here. Even if she was technically half owner of the liquor store, and our Christmas Village donor.

"Good morning, everyone," Bella said, smiling at us all. Michael straightened and beamed back at her.

Carol cleared her throat importantly. "I've been running numbers and extrapolating, based on precedent of prior years. Between the Christmas Village and the additional tourist population brought in by interest in Single Bells, I would estimate that if the trend holds, we're on track to survive the winter."

Diane nodded slowly. "I would agree. I've seen a big spike in revenue at the bakery, the thrift shop, and the Lady. If the same numbers continue to the end of the month, all three businesses will survive until tourist season picks up again in the warmer months."

Michael and Jim confirmed similar results.

"This sounds like good news," I snapped. "Not something that requires an emergency meeting."

Carol gave me a long-suffering sigh and opened a laptop. "If, Jane. The key word is if. If the trend holds. If the same numbers continue."

Why would she think they wouldn't? "I checked the reporting dashboard of the web series this morning," I said. "We have seven thousand more viewers than we did last week. Wouldn't that indicate that we'll have even more idiots flocking to town than before?"

Carol's lips tightened. "Yes. But if those 'idiots' come to the Christmas Village for thirty minutes to gawk at Single Bells and then leave to stay at the Vienna resort or eat in Wontana instead of staying in Falworth to spend their money, we're in trouble."

A tiny wrinkle appeared between Bella's eyes. "Why would they do that?"

Carol swiveled her laptop to face us. "Because the other towns have noticed their tourism revenue dipping and they're fighting back!"

It took me a minute to realize what she was showing us. It was the webpage where viewers accessed Single Bells. I never visited this page; I just looked at the administrative dashboard where we uploaded video and checked our viewership numbers.

Below the video window where viewers would click play to watch the episodes, there was a huge flashing ad banner. It alternately showed unflattering still images from Single Bells, then flashed to professional photos of Wontana's ice rink and the Vienna resort's Christmas décor.

The ad slogan read: Come for the trash, stay for the flash!

"What happens when you click on the ad?" Michael demanded.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

Carol clicked on it, and we were redirected to a brand-new website—a directory of all of Vienna and Wontana’s holiday events, restaurants, amenities, and hotels.

I got slowly to my feet, dumbfounded. “Let me get this straight. Vienna and Wontana have teamed up? Against Falworth?”

Carol nodded.

I blinked. “Those rich assholes are calling us trash—” which, fine, Single Bell was a little trashy, but the whole thing was being done for town survival! “—but they’re totally OK with using our trashy idea to pull our tourists to them?”

“Yes,” Carol said emphatically. “I can’t believe it either. We haven’t been able to compete with them in decades. I can’t believe they’d try to siphon away our income when they know how close we are to dying. It’s so mean-spirited!”

Mean-spirited didn’t even cover it, not in my view. How could they do this? Falworth might have been the black sheep town of the area, but it was still a place made up of hard-working people just trying to survive. People like me, who were trying desperately to make their lives better. The moneyed citizens of Vienna and Wontana hadn’t gotten together and said, “Let’s devise a plan to ruin Jane Zielinski’s life,” but it sure felt like it. It felt like a personal attack against everyone in this room.

Bella, as usual, tried to look on the bright side. “How do we know this ad campaign will even be effective?”

Carol frowned, deep lines digging around her mouth. “I called around yesterday.

We've had three canceled Airbnb reservations and six restaurant reservation cancellations. All within two hours of this ad going up."

Well, shit.

"What should we do?" Michael asked. "Or is there anything we can do?"

I sat down to think, mind racing. Before I could get far, Carol said, "I have two ideas. First, we need to try to extend our season."

"What does that mean?" Diane wondered.

"Single Bells is supposed to end with a fifth date, right, Jane?" Carol asked.

"Yeah. The bonfire at the beach on December 22." The pre-Christmas party by the lake would be a great visual finish to the series.

Carol looked at us apologetically. "I think there should be a sixth date. On New Year's Eve."

Jim and Diane frowned thoughtfully. Michael and Bella looked at one another—and then abruptly away.

I groaned. Loudly. "Carol. Whoa. New Year's Eve is a major holiday. What if the web participants already have plans? What if the camera crew doesn't want to work that night? Do you know what an enormous pain in the ass this will be to arrange?"

She folded her arms over her chest. "Think of the possibilities though, Jane. We can start mentioning the big NYE finale in the next date. What if we threw a huge NYE party to conclude the series? A party that anyone—hint, hint tourists—can buy tickets to. That could be a huge moneymaker. Plus, keeping the series going past Christmas

gives fans an extra week to come to town to the Village.”

She wasn’t wrong. There was big potential in the idea. But oh my God. I put my forehead on the table. “So much work,” I moaned into the scratched wood.

“I’ll start putting together lists,” she announced briskly. I had to give the rest of the group credit for grit. No one else whimpered a word of protest, although this would annihilate our schedules for the remainder of the month.

“What was the second idea?” Diane asked. “You said you had two.”

Carol paused. A long pause. It was such a hitch in her stride that I lifted my head from the table.

She cleared her throat, and her face folded into an apology. But not to me. “The Wontana Town Council meets today at eleven,” she said quietly. “I thought perhaps we might make a personal plea to them to take down that ad. To ask for a little more solidarity.”

Oh. Now I knew who the apology was for.

Bella’s face froze into a pleasant mask. After an uncomfortable beat of silence, she murmured, “I suppose I could do that.” Her calm voice didn’t match the dismay in her big blue eyes. Bella’s mother, Angela, sat on the Wontana Town Council.

“Thank you, dear,” Carol whispered kindly. Then her soft gaze became a targeted laser—a laser aimed at a bull’s-eye on my face. Her voice transitioned to one of a drill sergeant that harbored no room for bullshit. “Jane, you’ll go as well.”

\*

I shouldn't have been surprised when Bella pulled up to the Wontana municipal building with Nate in her car. I knew they'd been working together most mornings. But I'd been running around like a headless chicken since the emergency meeting this morning, trying to catch up on life. I hadn't thought it through. Seeing Nate's dark hair in the passenger window seized the breath in my lungs.

Bella got out of the car slowly, reluctance evident in every tiny movement she made. Despite my constant irritation with my one-time BFF, I could feel the pit in her stomach, and the sensation echoed in my gut.

I ground my jaw. "You don't have to go in there. You could just say no to Carol."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“I wanted to say no,” she admitted. “But Jesus, that ad is so shitty.”

Shitty it was, and it sure sounded like Angela.

Greta, her mother, had lived in Falworth her entire life and loved it, but Angela hated her modest roots. As one of the area’s leading real estate agents, she consistently counseled her buyers against investing in “Falling Worth” properties, even though they were more affordable and still close to the lake. Her own daughter was participating in the web series, yet she’d still labeled it “trash.”

“Have you talked to her lately?” Bella asked.

I laughed. “I waited on her during a business lunch at the resort over the summer, but I’m not sure her order of grilled walleye counts as talking. As you well know, we don’t move in the same social circles,” I said.

Bella flinched. Those were the exact words Angela had offered to Greta when my mom and I weren’t invited to her wedding. Even though we’d all lived together for years. Even though I was her daughter’s best friend and my mother had been a close friend to Angela. Temporarily, anyway.

To use one of her favorite words, we were too trashy. Then and now.

“I saw Aunt Kelly last week,” Bella said suddenly. “She looks great.”

I glared at her. Yes, my mom did look great. Not that it had anything to do with Bella taking her to lunch or still calling her aunt or sending her birthday cards or any of the

other things she'd done over the years to maintain their relationship. Things I determinedly ignored.

Nate opened his door and got out of the car before I could respond. "J-Bird," he said casually. As if we'd never tried to inhale one another standing up. As if he'd never seen me cry about my post-seizure dog.

"Hey." I tried to be offhand and casual, but I failed miserably. I was too twitchy and I didn't make eye contact and there was a weird, scratchy quiver in my throat.

Nate didn't seem to notice—but Bella did. She looked between Nate's face and mine, carefully, and then her lips folded in a cute smirk and she raised one meaningful eyebrow at me. Shut up, Bells.

"I'm here because Carol insisted, but I probably shouldn't go in there with you," I said. Angela and her snotty cohorts would take my presence as aggressive and antagonistic as opposed to reasonable and professional. And they would be right.

"OK." She squared her shoulders and bit her full bottom lip. "Here goes nothing." I watched her elegant stride and wished I didn't notice how stiff she was. Wished I didn't feel a sympathy ache in my stomach.

"What is with all the moody undertones today?" Nate asked. "You two are just a bundle of complex emotional subtext that I can't read. It's driving me nuts. I know the facts of what's happening, but I have no idea what's actually happening."

He took a step toward me, and I swallowed. One more step and I'd be able to feel the warmth of his body. "Care to fill me in?" he asked.

"Sure." It wasn't something I talked about, but I needed something, anything, to make me act normal around him, and the backstory of Bella and me was nothing if



not a mood killer.

I folded my arms over my chest and leaned back against my car. “Imagine, if you will, a hot summer night almost thirty-three years ago.” I pointed east, toward the lakefront. “A huge party on the beach. High school students drinking from a keg. Some of them from the local high schools, some of them tourists.”

Nate leaned back against Bella’s car and smiled at me. “All right. Go on.”

I waved my hand as if conjuring a scene in the air between us. “Picture two fifteen-year-old girls from Falworth. One was blond and blue-eyed, a JV cheerleader and on the regional academic decathlon team. One was dark-haired and dark-eyed, with poor grades and a penchant for cutting class to smoke weed.”

Nate nodded. “Sounds like they were pretty different young women.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “But at this particular party, they both made the same mistake and suffered the same consequence.”

“You’re quite the storyteller, J-Bird.” Nate gave me his flirtatious grin with the flash of teeth. My stomach muscles clenched. “What was this mistake?”

“They both got drunk, each had sex with a different boy from out of town, and got pregnant,” I said bluntly.

Nate blinked and the flirtation disappeared. “Oh.”

“Oh indeed.” I shrugged. “Not the most original story, but...”

“What happened next?” he asked.

“The blonde, Angela, was lucky. Although her father had passed away when she was young, her mother, Greta, loved her and accepted that sometimes young women make mistakes. That they shouldn’t be ostracized or punished. She believed you could make sacrifices, find solutions, and life could go on for everyone.” I cleared my throat. Would I always miss Greta thisdang much? Or would the pain fade month by month? Which outcome was worse?

“Kelly, the dark-haired girl, was not as lucky. Her parents were ultra-religious in the most hypocritical way. They kicked their daughter out of the house when they found out about the pregnancy.” Maybe my voice would have turned bitter if I’d ever met my biological grandparents. But they’d never spoken to my mom after kicking her out, and they both died when I was in grade school.

“Being knocked up in high school is pretty humiliating,” I went on. “Everyone gossips about you, and some people start avoiding you. Although Angela and Kelly weren’t friends before, their shared condition forged a close friendship. When Angela’s mother found out what Kelly’s mother had done, she invited Kelly to move in with them.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Ah.” A light dawned in Nate’s eyes. “I see.”

“Angela and Kelly had their babies one week apart when they were sixteen. Both had girls, another blonde with blue eyes who was destined for academic brilliance and success, and another dark-haired, dark-eyed girl who was destined for...” My voice faded.

“Great competence,” Nate supplied immediately.

I fought back a smile. “Angela and Kelly went back to high school, and Greta took care of the babies. She took care of them as they grew up and they both lived with her for a long time.”

I’d have liked to end the story there, but that wouldn’t have addressed the complex emotional undertones Nate was wondering about.

He helped me out. “What happened to Angela and Kelly after high school?”

“Post-pregnancy, Angela picked up on her life right where she left off. She worked hard and went to college out of town.” I was too little to remember, but I assumed she tore out of Falworth as quickly as she could, tire wheels screeching loudly.

“Was that hard on her little girl?” Nate wondered.

“Not really,” I said. Both Bella and I had been happy kids. We had Greta and we had each other. I took a beat, though, forcing myself to remember. No, it hadn’t been hard on Bella when she was small. Angela was sort of like a glamorous big sister figure

then. Bella's eyes would shine when Greta would mention how well Angela was doing away at school.

But when we got older, I guess it was a little different. She looked at Angela's picture before bed every night. Begged Greta to let us call her all the time, just to chat. Although Angela returned to this part of Wisconsin a few years after college, she never really came home to Bella. She maintained a careful, cordial relationship with Greta, and I didn't know what conversations were had behind closed doors. But Angela never moved back into the house with us, and she never asked for Bella to come live with her. Not when she moved in with friends after college, not when she moved into an elegant condo by herself, and not when she got married when Bella and I were in high school.

I swallowed over a lump in my throat. I hadn't thought about all of this in ages. How I'd once found thirteen-year-old Bella crying on the floor of our bathroom because Angela hadn't taken her out for a special birthday dinner. "Why does she hate me?" she'd said between hiccups.

Even then, I'd understood. "She doesn't hate you, Bells." I knew what it was by the way Angela's eyes slid away whenever she saw us. "She's embarrassed. Not of you! You are perfect. But of the simple fact that she has a teenage daughter." Angela liked to pretend the blip in the trajectory of her perfect life just never happened.

"And Kelly?" Nate asked quietly. "What happened to her?"

"She struggled." I shrugged. "She barely graduated high school, and she had a hard time keeping a job, and then the real problems started."

"The addiction?"

I nodded. So I'd stayed with Greta and Bella too. In high school, I'd become

hyperaware that our living situation wasn't normal, and I'd offered to leave, dozens of times. "Mom and I can get an apartment," I'd say to Greta. I didn't see much of Kelly, but I knew she was around. I saw her in the gas station parking lot sometimes. In the cabs of random trucks as they roared through the town square.

Sometimes kids at school gave me weird looks when I told them where I lived. After all, I wasn't related to Greta in any way, but here she was, feeding me. Clothing me. Offering to help with my schoolwork. She worked so hard, at her store and constantly volunteering throughout the community. I felt ashamed for being such a burden. I was sure my mom and I could afford a cheap place to live. If she worked full-time and I got an after-school job, it would be doable.

But Greta had known a lot more than I did about Kelly's lifestyle then, and she'd protected me. "I would be so sad if you left, Jane." She'd liked to end every day by pulling both me and Bella into her arms and squeezing, although by then we were both taller than her. "You two are my family. The exact family I have always wanted."

Some of the tightness in my throat relaxed and I was able to keep talking. "Neither Kelly nor Angela were the greatest mothers. But they gave their daughters the gift of being raised by Greta."

Nate nodded. He didn't ask anything, but I could practically see the questions behind those lips. "So to answer your earlier question about subtext, Bella has some mommy issues that she's being unfairly forced to deal with today," I added.

"Hmmm." He quirked one eyebrow. "What I really want to know is what happened between you and Bella. After such a unique childhood, I would have assumed you'd have a lifelong bond. Why aren't you friends anymore?"

Sourness rose in my stomach. Which annoyed me. I really was too old for this Bella-

inspired toxicity. If she'd learned one thing from Angela, it was abandonment. But I was a grown woman now. It shouldn't matter anymore.

The door of the municipal building flew open, and Bella appeared in the doorway. "We've run out of time for memories," I quipped. By the tight set of Bella's jaw, I could tell we were shit out of luck. "No dice on taking down the ad?" I called.

She shook her head quickly. "No." She cleared her throat. "They said it was just good business. That we could have capitalized on it if we'd been smarter. And they prepaid the ad for the entire month, so they couldn't take it back even if they wanted to."

She reached a pale hand up to wipe wet eyes. I narrowed mine. Bella wouldn't cry over anything the council had said about the ad. She was, however, eternally vulnerable to Angela. "What did she say to you?"

Bella's lips quivered as she tried for bravado. "Oh, you know. How embarrassed she was for me to be part of the series. How I was making myself look ridiculous. How I'm making her look ridiculous. That kind of thing."

I compared that reaction with the call I'd received from my mom a few nights ago. She was so interested in the series that she'd asked three dozen questions. "This whole thing is so cool! So badass, Jane!" she'd exclaimed. We'd laughed together about things the contestants had said and the many technical snafus our first-time cameramen were dealing with. Next week she was coming to the ice rink, where we were filming the fourth date. Just to watch. Just because she was interested and wanted to be supportive.

I looked down at the gravel beneath my feet. When I was in junior high, I used to feel ashamed about Angela and Kelly's comparative life arcs. Sometimes I was so jealous of Bella I could taste it. But now...

“That’s bullshit, Bells,” I said quietly. “You’re holding the entire series together. People are watching because they’re rooting for you. You’re saving the damn town.”

My face was hot, and my stomach twisted in an uncomfortable knot. I didn’t want to say these words, but they just popped out. Why did I feel the need to comfort Bella when I was still so angry with her? Would always be angry with her. Why were her tears still kryptonite for me? “Forget Angela. Focus on what Greta would think.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

She paused at that and met my eyes, her shoulders straightening. “You’re right.” She swallowed hard, and I saw determination slide back into her gaze. “You’re absolutely right.”

Nate cleared his throat, and I jumped in my sneakers. I’d almost forgotten he was there, and now I was completely embarrassed that he’d witnessed our little scene. Bella winced, obviously also uncomfortable. Emotional subtext, indeed.

“So what’s the backup plan?” he asked briskly. “The ad is the problem, and they refuse to take it down,” he summarized before flashing that signature grin at me. “Haven’t you concocted some sort of nefarious scheme, J-Bird?”

Honestly, I hadn’t—until right this instant. I whirled on Bella. “Do you know who on the council was responsible for actually creating the ad?”

\*

An hour later, the three of us and Michael regrouped across the street from Harlan Service, one of Wontana’s most profitable businesses. Don Harlan’s business supplied all of the golf courses and gated communities in southeastern Wisconsin with golf carts. He was a pillar of the Wontana community and had served on the town council for eleven years.

I started a conference call on my phone. “Dial in,” I instructed Nate and Michael. “I need to hear what’s going on so the timing is right.”

Nate did so immediately, eyes bright with mischief. Michael hesitated with his



fingers on the keys of his phone. His lips parted and he started to shake his head.

“Come here a second,” I said, pulling him a few feet away. I barked back at Bella and Nate, “You two rehearse your lines!”

I took a deep breath and looked up at Michael. He was a key part of this plan. Michael was the only person here who had an actual relationship with Don Harlan. Harlan Service contracted with Michael’s car washing business to keep the golf carts on the sales floor bright and shiny. It didn’t take a genius to see Michael felt pretty conflicted right now.

So he was the only person who had a chance of getting into Harlan’s office. But he didn’t like this plan one bit. “This seems awfully shady,” he’d said when I’d first outlined the steps.

“Let me tell you what happened when Bella talked to the town council this morning,” I whispered. That was all it took. As soon as he heard about Angela’s comments and Bella’s tears, he was all in. He dialed into the conference call, pressing the numbers on the screen so hard, the phone shook in his hand.

“Ready?” I asked.

Nate bounced on the balls of his feet. “Should we have a code word? Something we say if part of the plan is going awry? If we’re in trouble?”

Amused, I snorted. “We’re not exactly doing espionage here. No one is going to pull a gun or start a ticking bomb.”

He looked so disappointed that I relented. “Fine.” I smirked. “Code word isbrewski.” I almost wished something would go wrong so I could hear him say the silly word in that accent.

He clapped his hands together. “Slang for a cheap, watery beer. Very local. I adore it.”

I laughed at him, and Bella gave me that annoying eyebrow raise again. Shut up, Bells.

“Go!” I said. Nate threaded his arm through Bella’s, and she led him into Harlan’s display room.

Michael and I both raised our phones to our ears. I walked half a block away to make sure I wasn’t in sight, and he shuffled the papers in his hands.

In my ear, I heard Bella’s stiff, play-acting voice. “See, what did I tell you? The carts here are much nicer than the ones you’ve been looking at online. Besides, it’s much better to buy local.”

Nate’s loud voice sounded convincingly bored. “Eh. I don’t know. They’re more expensive.”

“Welcome to Harlan’s!” I recognized Don’s voice immediately. He sounded out of breath, like he’d sprinted up to them—which was his general approach. A soft sell, he was not. “What are we looking for today?”

I could hear the sweet smile in Bella’s voice. “Hi there! My friend is putting in an offer on a house in Tabby Springs,” she said. Tabby Springs was one of the most expensive gated communities near the lake. They had their own golf course, a yacht club, and a fleet of tennis courts. If you could afford to buy a house there, Don Harlan wanted to know you. “Obviously, he’ll need a golf cart once he moves in.”

“Of course!” Harlan sized Nate up. “What are you thinking, sir? A Club Car is a classic for a reason, but we have a variety of other brands as well.”

Michael looked back at me, and I gave him an emphatic nod.

He entered the dealership as Bella asked Harlan's opinion on the best electric models.

"Hey, Don." I heard Michael's nervous-sounding voice call through the phone. I imagined him holding up the sheaf of paper. "We had a small billing error last month. Got a revised invoice for you. Want me to throw it in your office?"

"Oh, I'll just grab it," Don answered. I groaned.No!

Then, thank goodness, Nate's voice. "The only thing I'd really be interested in here is the Garia."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:10 am*

I stifled a laugh. Oh, he was good. Harlan had displayed the luxury Garia Desert Collection model on his showroom for the last couple of years, but hadn't been able to sell it. This wasn't Palm Springs, after all. There might have been money in the area, but most Midwesterners couldn't stomach the idea of spending over thirty grand on a freakin' golf cart.

Excitement crackled into Harlan's voice. "You have quite the eye. Climb on in and I'll show you some of its features."

Michael spoke again, still sounding off-key and anxious. "The thing with the invoice is—"

Harlan cut him off. "Just throw it in my office, please."

Yes! Now we were cooking with gas! I did a half spin on the street.

Harlan droned on about the leather interior and azure paint color, and I waited. Thirty more seconds and Michael appeared on the street and gave me a thumbs-up. Hopefully, he'd managed to convey the same sentiment to Bella and Nate on his way out.

Nate interrupted Harlan's rhapsody about the quality of the Bluetooth speakers. "I'm certain I saw this exact model online for ten grand cheaper."

Harlan's voice sounded the tiniest bit indignant. "Not possible, sir. I can personally guarantee that you won't find a better price anywhere."

“Let’s see, shall we?” Nate sounded haughty, and I knew he was holding up his phone. “For Christ’s sake, don’t you have wireless in here?” Now he sounded like he was talking out the side of his mouth, probably toward Bella. “You want me to spend this kind of cash with a business that doesn’t bloody offer its customers wireless?”

“Of course we have wireless!” Harlan exclaimed.

Bella made an apologetic cooing sound. “Hmmm. I don’t think it’s working, actually.”

That was my cue. I smoothed my Geek Squad golf shirt and baseball hat, which I’d driven home to get. The clipboard clutched to my chest was empty.

Harlan sputtered, and I pictured him checking with his own phone. “I see. This is highly unusual, I can promise you that.” Frustration wound its way through his salesman’s voice.

I pulled open the door to the dealership, hearing the bell ping above the door. Harlan’s eyes flicked over, and he took in my work shirt and clipboard. “There’s been reports of an internet outage in the neighborhood,” I announced. “Can I take a look at your connection?”

Thank God Harlan was fairly clueless about technology, because it made no sense for me to check his personal setup if there was a neighborhood outage.

Nate blew out a long breath. “Until I can do a price check online, I guess I’d like to learn more about the engine.”

Harlan looked between Nate and me, clearly conflicted.

I tapped the clipboard against my flat palm. “I just need to check your hub, the wired

router, the core, wireless, and edge routers, as well as the VPN,” I stated nonsensically. Harlan had approximately two of those things, but he hadn’t paid any attention when I’d upgraded the dealership’s network and internet connectivity last year. “Can I have a look in your office, sir?”

He hesitated. “Ah—”

Nate broke in again. “How does one arrange a test drive?”

Harlan leaned into that question like a shark sniffing blood in the water. To me, he gestured down the hall. “Second door on the right.”

Nodding, I quickly walked out of sight. In Harlan’s office, I plugged back in the router Michael had disconnected and waited for the internet to come back online, heart pounding.

When the blinking dots indicated that connectivity had been reestablished, I sat at Harlan’s laptop. Like many of my clients, he’d ignored my stern advice about resetting his password after I left, so I was able to log in immediately with the default. I opened the one browser saved as a shortcut on the desktop and went to the web series site.

To my giddy delight, he’d saved his login and password info on the browser, and I was able to log in within seconds. I cracked my knuckles over the keyboard. Time to make a few adjustments.

I was so focused on changing the advanced settings of the ad parameters set that it took me way too long to notice that Nate was speaking much more quickly than before. “Well, this was a very productive visit to the dealership, wasn’t it? Perhaps we should celebrate with a brewski?”

I stopped typing immediately—and that’s when I heard footsteps in the hall. I silently shot to my feet and closed the lid of the laptop. Threw myself at the shelf where the modem and routers sat blinking. I entwined my hands around the thick cords just as Harlan appeared in the doorway. “What’s the problem?” he asked.

“No problem!” I chirped. “Your connectivity has been restored. You can verify on your phone,” I said quickly as he walked toward the desk. “I just need to run a quick diagnostic and I’ll be out of your hair,” I said quickly.

On the showroom floor, Nate’s voice boomed, “Christ, does the man want us to leave without giving us a business card?”

Harlan flinched and grabbed a card from a stack on his desk. “I’ll be right back,” he mumbled.

As soon as he disappeared, I opened the laptop and finalized the changes to the ad. Then I quickly tested it on both his browser and my own phone. Yes! I did a private fist pump before closing the browser and laptop.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

Hustling down the hall, I waved at Harlan, who was trying to persuade Nate to make him an offer. “You should act today. That unit will probably be sold by the end of the week,” he lied.

“You’re all good,” I called.

He waved back, although it looked more like he was trying to air-push me out of the building.

As I walked back to my car, I smiled so widely that the cold air hurt my exposed teeth. Holy shit, my plan had actually worked!

Because of the series of detailed IP targeting and geotargeting changes I’d made, if any tourists clicked on that obnoxious flashing ad, they would go to Falworth’s holiday event page. I’d spruce it up tonight, adding all sorts of other local businesses and attractions.

The Wontana council would never even know the ad had been changed, because if one of them tried to click on the ad, it would take them to the original page they created.

Cackling, I turned on my car’s heater, ready to drive toward home.

My phone buzzed with a text from Nate. And you didn’t think we’d hatch any schemes! It was a beautifully executed plan, Jane. Very impressive.

My cheeks began to ache I was smiling so widely. Thanks! I responded. Beware the



invisible IT girl.

Nate's response was immediate. Invisible? All I can see is you.

## Chapter Fourteen

Tuesday, December 16—Single Bells—Date 4—Ice-Skating

Pairings:

Bella and Nate

Nicole and Jim

Diane and Tripp

Mabel and Brian

Jane and Michael

“Huh.” I reread the list of date pairings Sean brought me and frowned.

“I know, right?” He shrugged with his palms up. “Voters are shaking things up a little.”

For the first time, Bella and Michael were not paired together. Maybe viewers had agreed with me and Nate that Bella and Michael should be paired with other people as punishment for their bowling obnoxiousness. Or maybe the viewers were getting impatient with their chaste, wide-eyed mooning. People who were accustomed to Bachelor content were primed for hot-tub time. There were a lot of online comments that boiled down to Why won't they make out already?!

If Bella and I were on different terms, I might have asked her the same question. Of course, they could be totally making out, just not on camera. But I didn't think so. There was too much uncertainty in Michael's gaze whenever he looked at her. Maybe Bella really was just doing the show to help the town and she wasn't romantically interested in Michael. Yet there was an emotional tension in the air when they were in the room together. Maybe she knew she'd be leaving in January and didn't want to mess with Michael's feelings any more than she already had.

For whatever reason, the viewers had finally put the good hometown guy with the bad hometown girl. I'd finally managed to get paired on an actual date with Michael.

Yay?

I bit back a frustrated sigh. Why wasn't I even the tiniest bit excited about it?

J-Bird, you have no feelings for Michael.

Sean scratched his head. "The Diane/Tripp pairing is new. Could be pretty funny."

I snapped myself out of my pathetic meanderings. "True." Diane had already proven she was a wild card. Led by #RozNGod, she was growing quite the online fan club. Tripp would do anything to extend his fifteen minutes of fame, so lots of potential there.

"Brian and Mabel again?" I clapped my hands together. I'd been hoping that would happen.

Sean nodded. "I know. They're both so nice. Mabel brings snacks and drinks for the crew every single time. Brian stays late to help us carry the camera equipment to our cars. I like seeing them together."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

I almost wanted to call Brian, harangue him to see if his apparent connection with Mabel was a ploy to tempt back his ex or if he was actually starting to fall for her.

“Nicole and Jim got the biggest number of votes,” Sean concluded the roundup.

Not surprising. “People love a second-chance romance,” I said. They’d looked pretty cute bowling together, but could one good date could really alter the trajectory of a couple on the brink of divorce?

Later that night, the femaleSingle Bellsparticipants gathered in the staging area of the Christmas Village an hour before the ice-skating date was to begin. Carol fluttered around like an overanxious butterfly, reminding everyone to mention the New Year’s Eve party finale while they were on camera. Much to my chagrin, she refused to abandon the NYE idea even though I’d assured her the ad was not going to cause any more problems.

All of the women dutifully did our pre-date confessionals. More than any other date, they were key tonight because network reality TV shows could get cameras moving over ice, but we didn’t have that equipment or skill set, so we couldn’t capture much conversation. We weren’t quite insane enough to stick one of our camera dudes in skates either. That would be a lawsuit waiting to happen. They’d just have to set up at various points around the rink and capture our couples in movement.

I leered at the camera in my villainous persona and said a variety of suggestive phrases, ending with, “I sure hope Michael will keep me warm on the cold ice rink.”

“Do we really have to skate?” Bella wondered aloud, fidgeting with her makeup

brush. As graceful as she was in most aspects of life, the ice rink was another happy place. “Can’t Nate and I just go get something to eat?”

“After you skate,” I said firmly. “We need interesting things to film, not just people sitting around.” We also still needed to lure tourists to the Christmas Village, and we hadn’t filmed there since the second date.

Turning toward the mirror, I examined my reflection. I wore all black again, leggings and a long-sleeved thermal shirt topped with a puffy vest. I pulled the tube of red lipstick from my pocket and stared at it. Should I make the effort of putting it on again? Nah. I’d probably just get it all over my teeth, and it’s not like Michael cared about anything I was wearing.

In the mirror, I caught a glimpse of Nate strolling along the Christmas Village path, presumably on his way to the ice rink.

Then again, maybe I did need a splash of color. I brought the lipstick to my mouth and carefully applied the red stain.

\*

Single Bell had the rink privately reserved for ninety minutes, and I’d been kinda excited all week about the mostly empty skating space. Now that the lake didn’t freeze over enough to be skated on, rinks were the only option in the area, and they were always so full of people. I loved to skate, but only when I could skate fast and free—not when I was constrained in a sea of others.

Unfortunately, Michael did not appear to share my enthusiasm. Our date started quietly. We skated in a slow circle around the rink, not saying anything. Michael was concentrating hard on the ice, eyes on a fixed point ahead of him, hands splayed at his sides as if anticipating that they’d need to break a fall.

We passed the rental area where Bella and Nate sat together lacing up in front of one of the cameramen. As we watched, Nate said something out of the side of his mouth, and Bella burst into laughter, her blond hair spilling over one shoulder.

Beside me, Michael's mouth turned down at the corners, and his hands went to fists. I pushed off hard to slide a few feet in front of him, then swiveled around to skate backward so we could look directly at one another. "They're just coworkers," I offered bluntly. "Friends. Nothin' more going on there."

He met my eyes, looking sheepish. "Am I so transparent?"

"Yes," I said. He'd always been that way about Bella. Crazy about her to the point of distraction.

We did another torturously slow loop. I did a few spins to amuse myself, since Michael's jaw was clenched and he didn't seem to feel like talking. So it surprised me when he shook his head and offered a self-admonishing grimace. "You must think I'm an idiot, huh? To be feeling this way about her when I know she's not here to stay."

Yup.

But that was pretty hypocritical. Why had I put on the lipstick again? Right. Because I, too, was daydreaming about someone who would vanish in the new year.

"You're not an idiot." I waved my hands expansively, indicating the world and life outside of this pretty little ice rink. "This town isn't the easiest place to live. I can get why you'd be excited about someone who brightens it up." I let out a long, mopey sigh. "Even though it's basically begging for your heart to get broken."

He laughed then, a big rumbly laugh I'd always liked. "Did I ever tell you that I

appreciate how you never sugarcoat things, Jane? People always know where they stand with you. It's refreshing."

I looked up at him, grinning. I liked that compliment a lot because it reminded me of Greta. "Thank you."

Since we were passing a cameraman, I threw a wink into the lens and then slid my arm through Michael's. He put a gloved hand over mine and arched an eyebrow while smiling down at me. "It would make much more sense if you and I were to date, wouldn't it?"

A surprised giggle bubbled in my chest. "Yup. I was thinking exactly that earlier this month."

He nodded thoughtfully while steering us directly into the side wall. With great effort, I straightened our path. Good God, he was heavy. "So why haven't we?"

He wasn't being flirtatious. There was not a hint of romance or sexual tension in the air. He was simply asking. Intellectual curiosity only. "Couple of reasons," I said slowly.

"No spark?" he asked, apologetically, as if I might take offense.

I didn't. "No spark," I agreed.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

It was more than that though. I hated to admit it, because she just didn't deserve it. "And you've always been Bella's. I've always thought of you that way."

We made another excruciating half-circle before he spoke again, this time in a whisper. "I've always thought of myself that way too."

A few feet ahead of us, Nate tugged Bella after him, her knees pressed together, her feet in a wide, awkward stance. Michael and I pretended not to look at them as we glided by. We are such a pair of fools.

Michael stopped skating a few feet later, gaping at something in front of me. "What in the actual hell are they doing?"

I followed his gaze and my own jaw dropped. "Oh Jesus."

Diane and Tripp were about twenty feet away, and a small crowd had gathered on the sides of the rink around them. "Stand right here, darling," she instructed Tripp with a firm pat on his bum. "You get those biceps ready. I'll be coming in hot."

Tripp beamed at her. "Just consider me your very own Patrick Swayze."

Diane skated away, raising her hands to the spectators, encouraging cheers. "It's been a few years since I've done this," she announced.

"Diane!" I hissed, skating up to her as fast as I could. "Please tell me you are not attempting to do some sort of lift."

She raised an eyebrow at me, unperturbed. “OK, I won’t tell you.”

“Ready when you are!” Tripp called, squatting a bit and holding up his hands.

Diane shook off my concern, pushing back her shoulders gracefully. “I’ve been skating for longer than you’ve been alive, Jane.”

“Yeah,” I said flatly. “That’s kind of the problem. We do not have any sort of insurance,” I warned her. “If you break a hip or anything else, you’re on your own.”

She flicked calm gray eyes in my direction. “You need to have more belief in the possibilities of the world.”

“You need to have more belief in gravity,” I retorted.

Diane did an elegant turn around this end of the rink, building momentum, and everyone in the crowd began to chant her name. “Di-ane! Di-ane! Di-ane!”

“Oh God,” I muttered as she sprint-skated to Tripp. I took a deep breath and held it, my hand going to the phone in my vest pocket. How long would it take me to ring through to 911?

Two feet in front of Tripp, Diane lifted her arms and leaped.

Really and truly leaped. Like she wasn’t a woman in her sixties who could be hurt. Like there was a mattress of clouds in front of her instead of a harebrained twenty-five-year-old dude. She flew right off the ice, jumping as high into the air as her admirable thigh muscles could push her. She soared up, up, and then...

Tripp caught her.



His hands gripped her hips, and he raised her straight into the sky as she arched her back and spread her arms wider.

It was shockingly beautiful. Stunning. Joyful.

The ice rink exploded with cheers. I tore my eyes away from the spectacle to make sure that our cameramen were capturing it from multiple angles. I met Sean's eyes, and he gave me a huge thumbs-up while mouthing wow.

Wow, indeed.

As Tripp carefully lowered her back to the ice, she murmured something in his ear, and then he swiveled and bent her backward in a low, dramatic dip. As her silvery-blond hair brushed the ice, he stared at her face as if he was mesmerized.

"You know," said an increasingly familiar accented voice behind me, "I think that woman deserves a spin-off show of her own."

I laughed and spun around to face Nate. "She's certainly our breakout star," I agreed.

I peeked behind his shoulders. "Where's your date?" I asked.

"With yours," he said, pointing to an opening of the rink where Bella and Michael stood together, noses scrunched as they pointed down at the skates on their feet.

"They're terrible skaters, aren't they?" I asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Just awful,” he confirmed, brow wrinkling thoughtfully. “Maybe all that combined height is a liability. They’re too far from the ground or something.”

I picked up speed, skating quickly for the other side of the rink. I mixed in a few spins and forward swizzles. Then a waltz jump. Just for me. Certainly not to show off any sort of competence.

To my surprise, Nate matched my speed easily, and his footwork was excellent. “You’re good,” I said after a moment.

“I played hockey growing up,” he explained. “None of my other siblings cared for it, so the rink was one of my very few personal spaces.”

I sped in front of him, bit my lip, and executed a perfect toe loop jump. When I landed, I grinned broadly. Yeah, I was showing off. Just like Diane.

“How are you such a good skater?” Nate asked. His pupils were dark in his eyes, and his voice was definitely raspy. Three cheers for competence.

“We used to be able to skate on the lake,” I said. In high school, I didn’t have the patience Bella did to study all night. I never wanted to ask Greta for the extra money to participate in school sports, but I always had way too much restless energy. “It was free and available all the time. When I was bored—and I was bored a lot—skating was what I did.”

We did another fast lap, laughing and breathless. I found myself grateful that most of the cameras were still focused on Diane and Tripp’s antics. Skating this way together

was like being in a cocoon. No one could hear us, no one could keep up.

“What was your last boyfriend like?”

The question came out of nowhere, and if I hadn’t been so focused on my form, I would have slipped and fallen. “What?” I exclaimed.

Nate laughed, and it was tinged with embarrassment. “I can’t help it! My curiosity is raging. You had that harebrained idea to date Michael when it’s obvious you don’t suit, so I’m dying to know about the last man in your life.”

I put hands on my swiveling hips. “It’s not harebrained to want to date someone steady and kind, you know.” It felt funny to be defending myself on this point when Michael and I had just agreed we had zero chemistry. And it was pretty dang cute that Nate was curious about my exes. I just wished there was more to tell. “Haven’t dated anyone in a while,” I admitted. “Pretty slim pickings in Falworth, and my schedule with work and Greta didn’t leave a lot of time to pursue out-of-towners.”

I thought about mentioning my occasional trysts with tourists, but what if Nate thought I was lumping him in with that crowd? Maybe he was technically a tourist, but to me he was...different.

“Who do you typically date?” I volleyed back instead. “What was your last girlfriend like?” I eyed him, taking in his expensive parka and high-end watch. “I’m picturing a tall, sophisticated woman with flawless makeup and highlighted hair. Someone who wears heels to work and carries an expensive purse.”

“Awfully shallow analysis,” he chided. I did notice the flush, however, so I figured I wasn’t too wrong. But he was right too. I shouldn’t be categorizing on appearance. Kudos to her if she had good hair and a nice bag.

“I bet she was impressive,” I said quietly, finally getting to the root of my own insecurity.

Nate narrowed his eyes. “Are you implying that you’re not impressive in some way?” He let out an incredulous laugh. “Have I not been clear on this point? I’ve never been as impressed with anyone in my life as I’ve been by you.”

“Oh, knock it off,” I said, skating faster again.

“I will not,” he said, easily keeping pace with me. “I can recognize someone who’s been dealt a challenging hand, you know. Look at how you’ve survived. With humor intact. With kindness.” Oh, I was not used to compliments. I skated even faster, but he caught me, clasped my mittened hands to his for a squeeze. My heart clenched along with our fingers.

“Were you home last night?” Nate asked abruptly.

I blinked at him, slowing on the ice. “No. I was bartending at the resort. Why?”

His gaze slid away. “I tapped on your door.” Now he picked up his speed, outpacing me. “The light was on, but you didn’t answer.” He paused. “I thought you might have been avoiding me. That maybe you thought our moment had passed.”

“I leave the light on for Bruce. He gets anxious alone in the dark,” I explained, neatly ignoring the rest of his sentence. Because there was a question in it, and I didn’t know how to answer.

Did I want our moment to be over? Hell no. It wasn’t that simple though. No, I didn’t want whatever was flaring between us to be over. But more importantly? I didn’t want it to be a moment.

Which was a problem.

“I have to head back to the city for a few days,” Nate said. “I’m leaving in the morning. I have a few work things I want to handle in person.”

See? I said to myself.

“I’ll be back here on the twentieth,” he said. He swiveled around so that he skated backward while I skated toward him. I didn’t like it. Didn’t like the feeling of chasing him.

I slowed, widening the distance between us. On the other side of the rink, Bella and Michael climbed back onto the ice and clambered slowly toward us. Part of me wondered why they even bothered, but I already knew. They were consummate good guys and they followed the rules. The viewers had voted for certain pairings, and we needed to get footage.

Suddenly exhausted, I swallowed a yawn. Thirty minutes and I’m heading home. Michael wouldn’t mind an early evening, especially if it meant he could get out of his skates.

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

I sidestepped around Nate and slid toward them. “Guess I’ll see you at the next Single Bellsdate on the twenty-second then. Have a good trip home.”

“Jane—” he called, but I was too fast.

### Chapter Fifteen

Of course, it didn’t really matter how quickly I could skate away from him when we were both going home to the same place.

When I pulled my truck into the apartment building parking lot, Nate was standing there in his winter coat, looking up at the stars. As much as I wanted to tell myself that the charge between us didn’t matter, that it didn’t matter, I couldn’t stop my stomach from doing a long, slow flip at the sight of him.

“J-Bird.”

I arched an eyebrow at him as I slammed my car door. “Hoping for a late-night booty call before you skip town?”

OK, that was harsh. Unfair. Rude. But why else would he be standing outside at night when it was below thirty degrees?

He snorted. “Glad to see we’re not wasting time with pleasantries. Thank you for the kind offer, but no, that’s not why I’m out here.”

“I wasn’t offering!” I exclaimed loudly.

He smirked at my outsized reaction, and I wanted to punch him. Or myself. When, exactly, had I become so easy to bait?

Nate held up his hands in an “I come in peace” gesture. “I’m waiting outside for you, freezing my arse off because you didn’t let me finish earlier. I’ll be back in Falworth on the twentieth and I wanted to know if you’re free.”

Huh?

He took a step closer to me, smiling a bit at my openmouthed look of confusion. “If you are free, can I take you out that night? Just you and me. No voting viewers. No cameras.” He grimaced. “No Carol.”

I couldn’t help laughing at that. “What?” I pretended to be shocked. “No nosy townsfolk? No Christmas Village?” I sighed ruefully. “No epileptic dog?”

“You can absolutely bring Bruce if you want,” he said, and something inside me went warm and soft and gooey.

Nate took another step toward me; all of the teasing had vanished from his expression. “I don’t care what we do, Jane. Your choice entirely.” He glanced around the empty lot before meeting my eyes again, tentative and serious. “I’d just like to spend some time alone with you. Real time with you.”

Real time. It was such a perfect phrase, because I could tell from the particular inflection in his voice on that word that he didn’t mean it in the way it was often used, as a signifier of quantity. He meant *real* as in the opposite of reality TV show dating.

“So, what do you think?” Nate asked. His tone was casual, but the focused look in his dark eyes was not. “December 20? Just you and me?”

For some reason, the image of Diane flinging herself into the air slid across my mind's eye. How unafraid she'd been. How full of joy I'd felt at seeing her soar.

I licked my lips and swallowed. I'd have to rearrange a few shifts, but... "It's a date."

Tension faded from his face. "A date." His eyes seemed to glow, like one of the stars he was so fond of. "Lovely."

We stood in the darkness for a full minute, just smiling at one another in the cold night. My fingers and the tip of my nose were on their way to frozen, but I didn't move a muscle. I made a mental note to stop myself from any future eye rolls at Michael's expense for his sappy looks at Bella. I didn't need a mirror to know that I looked like a crush-struck teenager.

"Well." He finally broke the long silence, brisk and no-nonsense. "I shall leave you to get some sleep."

No.

"I think we're alone now," I blurted. Ugh, why was I so monstrously awkward?

Nate's eyes crinkled. "Are you quoting Tommy James and the Shondells?" He whistled the tune to "I Think We're Alone Now" and the melody echoed through the parking lot.

"No," I countered immediately. "I'm quoting Tiffany." Kelly and Angela had sung her 1987 cover of the song around the house when we were tiny. My mom once told me that she'd had her first kiss to it at a seventh-grade dance.

His voice lowered in a hush. "To be perfectly honest with you, J-Bird, I prefer her version. Don't tell anyone."



I laughed, out of both surprise and relief. He was so good at putting me at ease, at transforming me from shy to bold.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

In fact...I took a step from the cars to the building. “You said you wanted to spend time alone with me.” I opened my eyes comically large and took a long look around the desolate parking area and black windows of the building. “I think we’re alonenow.”

His eyes went wide, and his jaw dropped an inch before he recovered and shook his head. “That is not why I was waiting out here, Jane,” he said firmly.

My quick strides ate up pavement until I reached the apartment building. But I didn’t go to my door. I went to his. “I know.”

I waited for him by the door as he shifted his weight and clenched and unclenched his fists. Oh no. Had I read this all wrong? “Sorry. I can just go home,” I offered quietly.

“No!” he said quickly, finally walking toward me. I noted the one pink ear tip. “You just shocked the hell out of me, that’s all.” He grabbed my hand and put it against the pulse point at his neck. “My heart’s about to pound out of my chest.”

I could feel it slamming in my palm—the hard, fast beat. I wanted to purr. I’d done that. Just the thought of being with me had spiked his heart rate. My gaze went to his mouth.

Imagine what the actual me could do.

He had almost no furniture in his rental. There was a big, ugly kitchen table I was sure had come with the unit. His laptop sat open on it, surrounded by notebooks with scribbled lists in various handwriting, some familiar to me as my own. He and Bella

must do their work at that table.

A large recliner and flat-screen TV were the only two things in the living room. The bedroom door was ajar. A king-size mattress lay on the floor, covered by a thick navy comforter.

“I didn’t plan to entertain while I was here,” he said, sounding embarrassed. “This place looks like it belongs to a twenty-two-year-old meathead who didn’t want to move out of the frat house.”

“I bet it looks exactly like Tripp’s place,” I agreed, snorting. “I doubt your apartment in Chicago looks very different,” I teased.

“You’ll see when you visit,” he retorted.

I didn’t know what to do with that, so I just made a noncommittal noise in the back of my throat and wandered toward the kitchen. “Can I offer you a glass of wine?” Nate asked.

I hadn’t intended on that when I’d invited myself over. But these transitional moments just defeated me. I had no idea how to go from my parking lot bravado to that mattress on floor. “Sure.”

He pulled a bottle from the corner of the kitchen and uncorked it. It was the nicest Merlot that Greta carried in the shop. “Fancy.”

He gave me a smile that was part embarrassed and part sardonic. “I got a bottle last week and enjoyed it, so I bought another. As much as I’d love to be a brewski kind of guy, I’m afraid I actually prefer wine.”

I took a long sip from the glass he offered, letting the red swirl in my mouth and

savoring it with an appreciative hum.

He watched me with a hawk's eyes. "Good?"

I tilted my neck back and swallowed. "Very."

He was right in front of me before I could even straighten. All of the breath in my lungs disappeared as one of his arms snaked around my back and pulled me to him. His other hand went to my nape. "I want to taste it on you."

He kissed me before I could respond, before I could breathe, before I could think. His lips pressed against mine, as lush as I remembered. His tongue danced lightly into my mouth, and I had the distinct feeling of being tasted, like he was intently absorbing the flavor and texture of me.

He broke away to mutter "delicious," and my insides lit up like all the Christmas lights strung over town.

Blindly, I set the wineglass on the kitchen counter and wrapped my arms around his neck, twining our bodies together. As we clung to one another in silence, I became intensely aware of the sounds around us: the refrigerator humming, the hissing of air from the heating vents, the wind against the windowpanes.

Nate said softly, "I've imagined you here with me a hundred times in the last week. Maybe a thousand times. And now that you're here, I'm so delirious I don't know what to do with you."

Nate was nervous? The thought was like a pinprick to the balloon of anxiety in my chest, and the last bits of uneasiness began to drain away. I licked his neck and whispered in his ear. "Well, tell me what you've imagined."

His laugh was harsh, and I could feel the hard pound of his pulse as I pressed my lips to his neck again. “Look around, Jane. In my mind, I’ve had you in every place imaginable.”

“Is that so?” Drawing away, I patted the kitchen counter and raised my eyebrows. “Here?”

Nate’s nostrils flared. “Definitely.”

Oh my. I suppressed a smile and just nodded sagely. “Solid choice.” I wandered over to the kitchen table and bent over suggestively to put my elbows on it. “Here?”

Nate closed his eyes. “Fuck. Yes.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

My stomach quivered. Not to mention my knees. I glanced down at the floor. “In your imagination, did you ever just eschew the furniture altogether and take me on the floor?”

His eyes flew open, and he began to prowl after me. “Yes. In every room.”

I took a few quick steps from the kitchen alcove into the living area, my nerves flaring as he followed. God, I loved this. I loved the dance, the tease, making him crazy. Suddenly, I remembered what he’d said in the bowling alley. I’m dying to see what you look like in just your bra.

Well, then.

I unzipped my puffy vest and let it fall off my shoulders on the floor. I crossed my arms in front of me and pulled the black shirt over my head. I threw it at him, and he didn’t even try to catch it. His attention was one hundred percent focused on the sight of my naked upper body, covered only by black lace. “I’m glad I wore my one sexy bra tonight,” I said breathlessly, backing away as he came near.

“I don’t think it would matter.” His eyes were dark sparks, and his voice sounded strangled. “Look at you. In black lace or white cotton, I’d want you. God, I want you. More than I can possibly describe in paltry words.”

Maybe he thought the words were paltry, but wow, were they working for me. I slid my leggings from my hips, down my thighs and calves, grateful when I was able to get them off my feet without stumbling.

Nate's jaw worked as he stared, his eyes roving up and down. "You're perfect. Every inch of you. Look at you," he exclaimed, and I almost gasped as he moved a hand down to grip himself briefly. "You're trim and tidy and small, and yet you have these perfect curves."

He suddenly looked fierce and determined as we made eye contact. "I'm going to taste every last one."

I was so turned on I was trembling. I wanted him and not in a leisurely way that would accommodate all that tasting.

Not the first time, anyway.

"Shirt off," I commanded in a low, throaty voice. He obeyed immediately, whipping his fleece and T-shirt over his head in one fluid motion. My palms twitched. I wanted to run them all over the lean muscles in his chest, abdomen, and back.

"Sit." I pointed at the recliner. The authority in my voice was only slightly undermined by how it shook.

Nate raised one dark brow, but he never broke eye contact as he followed orders and sat on the chair, legs spread wide, feet flat on the floor. "Unbuckle," I said slowly, pointing to his midsection. He obeyed, getting rid of his belt and loosening his jeans.

I approached him slowly, bent over, and encaged him with my hands braced on the armrests. I rubbed my cheek against his, bit lightly into his earlobe. "What about the chair?" I murmured. "In your mind, have you had me right here?" I finished the question on a whisper and another nibble of his earlobe.

His hands closed hard over my hip bones, and he tugged me down until my knees were on either side of his thighs. "Yes." His mouth closed over my nipple and I

shuddered.

I arched my back, pushing my breast harder against his face and sliding my hands down his warm back. “I hope reality can measure up.”

His hot mouth went to my other breast. “Are you kidding? The fantasy has already been blown to bits.” He sucked and bit at me until I squirmed.

“Not a very good imagination?” I teased, tracing my nails up and down his spine while grinding up and down on his hard length.

Nate hoisted me up with one strong arm, high enough for him to tug his pants off his hips with the other. “I’ll have you know that I have an excellent imagination.” He grunted. I reached down and stroked the bare length of him with my hand, and he made a wonderful choking sound. His hand fisted in the hair at my nape, and he kissed me, hard, until I was panting and shaking all over. “But I could never have imagined this. The way you smell, the sounds you make, how I hang on every syllable that comes out of your gorgeous, perfect mouth.”

As far as I was concerned, he was the one with the gorgeous, perfect mouth. I wanted him to keep talking, but I also wanted his tongue on every inch of my skin, so it posed a bit of a dilemma.

Licking my lips, I raised myself with my thigh muscles and positioned him perfectly. Then I lowered myself onto him, inching down slowly until he filled me completely. “Oh,” I gasped.

“Holy fuck,” he bit out. “Christ, you feel so good.” Trembling from the exquisite stretch and feel of him, I raised myself a few slow inches before sinking down again. Hard, our foreheads pressed together and slick with sweat.



“More,” he said through gritted teeth. “Again.”

I paused mid-slide and gave him a cocky smirk. “Say please.”

He raised that eyebrow again, and instead of begging, he slid a hand between our bodies and pressed a knuckle directly onto my clit. I cried out at the same time as he whispered, “Please, Jane.”

After that, there were no more slow moves. No strategy and no finesse. Just our bodies moving furiously together and his hands on my bare ass and my teeth at the juncture between his neck and shoulder.

Just insanity-kissing and groans of delight and that wonderful moment of silence as all my internal muscles contracted. “Oh God.” I ground down on him as hard as I could while he pumped into me, and we dove headlong into the waves of pleasure that swamped through every nerve ending.

## Chapter Sixteen

“What’s with you today?” Bella asked, twirling on the stool next to the shop register.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Huh?” I looked up from where I was shelving bottles of Chardonnay, glassy-eyed, caught mid-memory of the moment last night when I’d given Nate a soft kiss goodbye. That little farewell peck had transitioned very swiftly to something else. I’d been easily persuaded to stay for another very hot hour. We’d somehow never made it to that mattress on the bedroom floor, but hopefully I’d blown to bits any fantasies Nate may have had about his shower stall.

Now, I blinked a few times to clear out the lust cobwebs. “What do you mean?”

Bella’s mouth twitched. “Well, I’ve been here for thirty minutes and you haven’t glared at me or rolled your eyes or asked me when I was leaving.” She wrinkled her brow. “You’re not even actively ignoring me. You’re just humming, lost in your own little world.”

I cleared my throat. “When are you leaving?” I asked, glaring at her now, but my heart wasn’t really in it.

“You know, it’s funny,” she mused.

“What’s funny?” I snapped.

Her bright blue eyes crinkled at the corners. “The first time I met Nate, he impressed me so much. He was so matter-of-fact and knowledgeable. Even though I’d intended to interview a lot of other people before hiring someone to manage my product launch, I hired him within ten minutes. He was just so capable.”

Although I was a little embarrassed that she’d leaped directly to the reason I was in a

rosy little bubble this morning, I didn't really understand her point. "I don't get what's funny."

She widened her eyes emphatically. "I hired him because he reminded me of you."

Disconcerted, I blinked a few times. Before I could deflect, her lips turned into a wicked grin. "Please tell me he's a better kisser than Eric Dodson."

Automatically, I made a loud gagging noise. Eric Dodson had been my first make-out session, and it had not been a pleasant experience. I'd run straight from his parents' basement into Bella's bedroom and recounted each minute of the ordeal in excruciating detail. We'd stayed up the entire rest of the night wondering if tentacle-tongue would be part of every kiss. Luckily, Bella kissed Michael for the first time a few months later and we were further enlightened.

"Do you ever see him around town?" Bella asked.

"Eric? Yeah." He was one of the area's most experienced electricians. He'd fixed something in Greta's fuse box just last year.

Bella cocked her head. "When you see him, do you think of that awful kissing?"

I shouldn't. It had been seventeen years ago. But it had been such a formative experience. I closed my eyes. "Every time," I whispered.

Bella let out a huge honking laugh. It wasn't her usual tinkling laugh that pealed sweetly like a harp. This was the belly laugh of hers that she only let loose when something really hit her funny bone. I hadn't heard it in more than a decade, and I'd forgotten what a ridiculous sound it was.

Before I could stop myself, I was laughing too. The hard kind of laughter, where I

doubled over wheezing with watery eyes. For a minute, the shop sounded like it was full of overexcited geese instead of two women.

The bell that hung over the front door of the shop pinged. I pulled myself together, wiping my eyes and focusing on the new arrival.

Nate stood in the doorway, wearing a tailored navy suit over a crisp white shirt. His hair was styled with gel, and he wore a pair of tortoiseshell glasses I hadn't seen before. Hot, my brain sighed, fizzing and smoking at the circuits.

Grinning, I made to disengage myself from the dusty bottles. It was just so sweet of him to come say goodbye to me before leaving town. I'd left him in the middle of the night because I needed to tend to Bruce. "See you on the twentieth," I'd whispered in his ear, and he'd smiled sleepily.

But he must have woken up and decided to come see me before heading back to Chicago. Awwww. Bella was going to tease me so badly after he left.

Except he didn't look around the shop for me at all. His gaze alit on Bella's face, and he held up his phone. "Bella, you're not going to believe it! I have wonderful news."

She climbed off the stool and squinted toward his phone screen. "What?"

"You've been invited to speak at the national Black Hat conference," he exclaimed.

Bella practically fell backward, plopping down onto the stool with a large thump. "What?" she asked weakly.

He crowed, "It's only the biggest conference in your field!" His smile was wide and white, almost fierce. "Mid-March in Las Vegas. It'll line up perfectly with the release of TowerWizard. Bella, this is huge. You'll gain instant credibility for your

presentation. We couldn't have bought this kind of publicity."

"Holy cow," she said. "I can't believe it." She sounded as if she really couldn't.

Nate's voice softened slightly. "I know it was a rough last six months for you, but all that nonsense is in the past. This is going to be an incredible success." He spun on his heel toward the door. "I need to run. Gotta take a conference call in my car on my way home. I'll email you all the details. We'll need to start prepping for it immediately after the new year. Perhaps I'll arrange office space back in the city. Congratulations!"

Then he was gone. He'd hadn't even seen me. No, worse. He hadn't even looked for me in my own goddamn store. I felt sick—dizzy and disoriented, plummeting back to Earth. A horrible emotion swamped over me, thick like slime. A sticky mixture of humiliation and disappointment and foolishness.

What in the hell had I been thinking to get so excited and happy about last night? Why had I begun to believe that it had meant something? I knew better. It hadn't been the start of anything. God, did I know better.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

Nate had seen a lot of my actual life, but I'd seen almost nothing of his. I wasn't going to be a part of it—not in any way. I was just an out-of-town fling. Something to make the December he spent slumming in small-town Wisconsin a little more pleasant. I sat down hard on the floor of the aisle, blinking back harsh tears and swallowing over a jagged lump in my throat.

The bell above the door rang again. Jesus, we were Grand Central Station today.

“Good morning!” Michael's warm voice echoed through the shop. “I brought you breakfast.” The scent of warm croissants and coffee drifted into my nostrils.

“Oh, thank you,” Bella murmured, still sounding a little distracted. Bitterness flooded through me, acidic saliva in my mouth. What it must be like to be Bella. To have one man come and deliver exciting career news and another bring her breakfast while gazing at her like she hung the freakin' moon.

I heard the sounds of coffee being poured into a cup and a bakery box opening. “I have some exciting family news,” Michael said. “Nancy got engaged.”

“No way!” Bella exclaimed. Nancy was Michael's younger sister. She'd been dating her boyfriend long-distance for two years while he got his master's in engineering from Northern Michigan. “Tell her I said congratulations.”

“They've decided on a destination wedding,” Michael said, slurping some coffee. “The Bahamas. Second weekend in March.”

“So soon!” Bella said.

“Eh.” Michael gave the verbal equivalent of a shrug. “They’ve been dating for years. They don’t see much point in a long engagement.” He paused. “I was thinking...” I could hear him swallow from all the way near the back of the store. “Come with me. To the wedding.”

Still on the floor, I cringed and closed my eyes. Michael, what are you doing? Didn’t we talk about this on the ice last night? She was leaving. They both were.

Bella didn’t answer right away. She would look the perfect amount of surprised and delighted. Maybe a little unsure, in an adorable way. “Oh wow,” she said. “Um...”

Be straight with him. Don’t string him along.

“I want to,” Bella finally said, softly.

“Great!” Michael burst out, way too loudly. He sounded thrilled. Why wouldn’t he? He’d just invited her to a serious family event three months in the future and she said she wanted to go. He was planning for the future with her, and she was acting like she wanted that.

But she hadn’t actually said yes, had she? She just said she wanted to, which let her make him happy in this moment but also gave her the perfect opening to back out later when she “remembered” that she had a work conflict.

Seething, I blocked out the rest of their breakfast conversation. Finally, the bell above the door rang again, signaling Michael’s departure. I got to my feet on shaking legs.

Bella saw my head pop over the shelves and jumped on the stool. “Oh my God, you scared me! I thought you were in the storeroom.”

“Nope,” I hissed. “I was sitting right here, listening to you spout your poisonous

bullshit.”

Bella stood slowly. “Excuse me?” Normally, when I compared her to Disney princesses, I thought of Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella. The kind of princess with a soothing, melodic voice that woodland creatures danced around. But right now, she was more Elsa: taut and ready to brandish some sort of ice weapon.

“You’re stringing Michael along, and it’s not fair to him!” I shouted. “This is not some melancholy Taylor Swift song about holiday time and roads not taken, Bella. You’re going to crush him. He’s in love with you again! And you know you’re just going to walk away when this month is over. You’ll go back to your real life, and you’ll take his heart with you.”

“That’s not true,” Bella protested icily, but her blue gaze slid straight to the floor.

“What part?” I said, charging toward her. “He’s not in love with you? You’re not going to leave? What, exactly, do I have wrong?”

Bella looked back up at me, her voice steely. “You’re being very unfair. You have no idea what it’s like now between me and Michael—”

“Maybe not,” I interrupted wildly. “But I know a lot about what Michael is like after you leave.” My voice grew to a near shriek. “I know a lot about what it’s like to be abandoned by you, Bella.”

Bella’s parted mouth transitioned to a perfect O. “Abandoned by you?” she screeched. “What world are you flipping living in, Jane? You abandoned me. We were supposed to leave this town together. We’d been planning it for years! Then all of a sudden, I’m off to Madison by myself and you’re not coming. Do you know how scared I was?”



I could feel long-held anger vibrating in waves off of her. If she'd been Elsa, I would have been impaled in the throat with an icicle.

Which I would have melted with the heat of my rage. I honestly began to see red at the edges of my vision, the fury was so strong. She was the one who got out! She was the one living the life we'd both wanted!

"I cannot believe you. You haven't been back to Falworth in more than ten years and you're actually trying to make me feel sorry for you?" I was shaking so hard my teeth audibly clicked together. "You are the most selfish person I've ever met."

"Selfish!" Bella howled. "How is it selfish to carry the dreams of half the town? Do you have any idea how exhausting it is? You know nothing about my life, Jane, and you know why? Because you were too scared to try. You talk such a big game and swagger around like you hate this place, but you were too scared to leave."

Scared? The crimson haze was clouding my entire vision now. I needed to get out of here before I started breaking liquor bottles. Over her head.

## Page 57

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Jesus fucking Christ, Bella, how was I supposed to go?” I howled. “Greta had gotten her first diagnosis! Kelly had just fallen off the wagon again. Who was going to take care of them if I left?”

The words slipped out, mindless. I was feeling too much. I couldn’t get myself under control. I’d always known I’d completely lose it if we ever tried to talk. Which was why I’d never confronted Bella before. Not that she’d ever called or been in town to give me a chance.

“Wait, what?” Bella asked, the shards of her voice getting slushy.

I pushed at the door so hard that the bell came flying off and hit the ground. I wanted to put my fist through the window on the door and exit in an explosion of glass, but I settled for screaming “Just leave!” at her as loudly as I could.

### Chapter Seventeen

8 p.m.:I can’t stop thinking about you.

9:37 p.m.:What have you done to me, J-Bird? I’m walking into walls, daydreaming about you.

10:48 p.m.:Are you working tonight?

7:30 a.m.:Good morning. Given any thought to what you want to do on our date Saturday?

2:58 p.m.:I'm feeling quite ignored.

9:13 p.m.:Seriously, Jane—are you ignoring me?

I put the buzzing phone under a couch cushion and got down on the floor to pet Bruce. He looked at me with reproachful brown eyes. “I know,” I said. “I’m being a bitch.” But sometimes that’s what self-preservation looked like. Sure, maybe Nate did reciprocate my crush. He could probably afford crushes. He probably got a new one every couple of weeks.

I didn’t.

I caught sight of the bottle of hot sauce he’d given me, displayed in a place of prominence on my kitchen counter, and my chest began to ache. He was probably bewildered as to why I was ignoring him after our spectacular night together. But I’d seen him first thing the morning after and I was the furthest thing from his mind. So I knew he’d recover quickly. He’d get angry or he’d get bored or he’d get distracted by something else new and shiny. Most importantly? He’d get gone.

Bruce sighed woefully and licked my hand. He was way too good at reading the emotional undertones of the room, and he was clearly picking up on my depressing vibes. “It’s OK, buddy. December has got to end sometime.”

I frowned, realizing how often I muttered some version of that phrase aloud. “This shift will be over soon.” “Thank God summer is almost over.” “This winter is endless. I can’t wait for it to be over.”

Was this how I was going to spend my entire life? In segments I wished would be over?

Greta would be so ashamed of me.

Rolling onto my back, I stared at the ceiling and thought back to the August after high school. I'd been so relieved to graduate in May. Bella and I worked our tails off that summer, trying to save as much money as possible for the coming year in Madison. We'd had three jobs each: waitressing, nannying for summer folks, parking boats at the public pier. Fourteen-hour days, six days a week.

In the few hours we weren't working, Bella was saying the world's slowest goodbye to Michael, and I was looking for Kelly. My mom dropped off the face of the planet that spring. She surfaced every few weeks at one of the town bars, but she hadn't come to visit at Greta's in months. I was old enough by then to recognize the signs. Kelly had been in and out of rehab before—paid for by Greta, a fact I was both grateful for and humiliated by.

"She's hopeless," I'd once snarled—after Kelly had broken into Greta's shop and raided the shelves. "Don't ever spend money on her again."

"No one is hopeless, Jane," Greta shouted right back at me. "No one."

It was because I was working nonstop and distracted by Kelly that it took me so long to notice that something was wrong with Greta that summer. She hired twice as many staff at the shop as she normally did, which was odd given her usual control freak nature. She'd always been a bundle of energy, but now she was constantly fatigued in spite of going to bed early and napping. By mid-July, the skin under her eyes had taken on a constant bluish tint from exhaustion.

I gradually noticed that whenever I was with her for any length of time, she always found a reason to leave the room at some point, hand pressed against her abdomen. "Indigestion," she shook it off. "Upset stomach, no big deal."

She also took herself to a chiropractor for the first time in her life. "It's not uncommon for a woman my age to have back pain," she'd sniffed at me when I

expressed concern.

She was also just a hell of an actress. She was still upbeat and singing around the house, cheerfully complaining about tourists, constantly asking Bella and me to look at the Target sales so we could make sure we had everything we'd need for our apartment when we moved to Madison. I noticed the fatigue, upset stomach and back pain—but it took me months to realize that it wasn't normal for a relatively young woman to suddenly be hit with all these things at once. Longer still to convince her to make an appointment with her GP. "Fine, fine," she'd huffed. "Just don't go worrying Bella with this nonsense. She's already dealing with a broken heart."

A week before we were supposed to leave, I finally found the broken-down motel where Kelly was living. It was one step above a flophouse, and she was so drunk and high that she barely recognized me. When she did, she just smiled weakly and asked if I could give her some money. She was thinner than I'd ever seen her, the bones in her face creepily prominent. To her profound disappointment, I'd given her a bag of Big Macs instead of cash.

Then I'd driven home to Greta, wondering how to tell her that Kelly needed help yet again. Thank God Bella was working the late shift at the restaurant and we could have this shameful conversation in private. Thank God Greta would never tell Angela. I'll work double shifts and send Greta money from Madison, I told myself, already feeling sick about the unfairness of drop-kicking Kelly's problems at her and skipping town.

The house was dark when I arrived, so dark that I guessed Greta was over at Carol's for cards or volunteering at some town shindig. But she wasn't. She was sitting still at the kitchen table over a hot cup of tea that had gone cold in the strong air-conditioning. There was a blankness in her expression I'd never seen before, and it made me go cold too. My thoughts raced: Bella was OK—I'd just texted with her when I got out of the car. I hadn't heard any sirens tonight, so there hadn't been any

sort of accident in town or on the lake.

Suddenly, I remembered her doctor's appointment. But it had been weeks ago, and she hadn't said a word.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

I waited for her to say a word now, but she didn't. She just stared blankly into space. I sucked in a shuddering breath, experiencing vertigo from the role reversal. Greta wasn't going to comfort me tonight. She wasn't going to take care of me.

I was going to take care of her.

Briskly, I turned on the kitchen light, zapped her cup of tea in the microwave, and sat down in front of her. "Tell me," I said.

She finally raised her watery eyes. "Ovarian cancer."

I nodded calmly, although the two words had been like a bolt of lightning. If I'd gotten up from the kitchen table to see a streak of white in my hair, I wouldn't have been at all surprised. "OK. What, ah, stage is it? What did the doctor say about treatment?"

My ultra-Zen demeanor was the exact right choice. I could practically see Greta giving thanks that she didn't need to handle someone else's hysteria. "Stage 1," she said. "So that's good."

"That's very good," I agreed. I stood to put the kettle on, as though I wanted tea too. Really I just wanted to give her space to talk without someone staring at her with wide eyes.

She bit at her lower lip before continuing. "First, I'll need surgery to remove the tumor. Then a course of chemo, probably."

I frowned and sat back down. “Surgery and chemo. That seems like a solid plan. Where?” There was no hospital in Falworth. No medical facility in any close town for that kind of treatment.

She sighed. “My new oncologist is in Kenosha.” She put a frail hand to her temple and yawned, looking so exhausted I wanted to drape a blanket over her right then and there.

Kenosha was an hour’s drive away, more if there was any weather or construction on Highway 50. I didn’t know anything about surgery or chemo, but I suspected a fair amount of the next several months was going to be spent driving back and forth. Greta wouldn’t be able to do the drive herself, not if she was sick. Maybe her friends would help, but they all had families and responsibilities of their own. How would she run the shop while she was sick? Her summer help would all go back to college after Labor Day.

The teakettle began to scream. I got up and put fresh bags in cups. Poured the steaming water. I probably should have made some tea for Kelly before I’d left her tonight. Her hands had been so cold when I handed her the food. Not that she seemed to notice. But tea would have been good for her. Warm and hydrating.

My phone buzzed with a text from Bella. This shift is never-ending!!! Seven days until we’re outta here!!!

I squeezed my eyes shut so hard it hurt. For maybe the first time since we’d gotten phones, I didn’t respond to Bella’s text.

Instead, I put my phone back in my pocket and took the mugs to the table. “I’ve been thinking,” I said carefully. “I’m not sure it makes sense for me to go with Bella next week. I can always start up at the community college in Madison during the winter semester. She’s going to be so busy with her mega-brain classes right away anyway.”



If I didn't go, I could use the money I'd saved for the past three months to get Kelly in somewhere, and I'd watch her like a hawk. I'd be able to take Greta to her treatments and mind the shop.

"Jane," Greta started to protest.

"What?" I'd said simply. "Am I your family or am I not?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "Of course you're my family."

"Well then." I'd stood again and grabbed a box of her favorite ginger cookies from the pantry. "These are the kinds of things families do."

I didn't ask her how she was going to tell Bella because I already knew she wouldn't. If Bella knew, she wouldn't leave. Which wasn't an option. Bella was the star of our high school, and the entire town was ecstatic about her full ride to the university. When we were notified of the scholarship, Greta had cried tears of joy and pride for a full hour.

Bella was going.

Bella thought I was joking when I told her a few days later that I wasn't going with her. "Yeah, sure." She'd winked. "You're just going to stay here forever and rot?"

"Not forever," I said. Already, I had my doubts about the winter timeline I'd first mentioned to Greta. I'd have to spend all of my savings and then some to get Kelly into a reputable rehab facility. If I was caring for Greta, I wouldn't be able to work enough to save as much cash as I'd need to move. It would realistically take more like a year.

So, to Bella, I said, "You should live in the dorms. Get a roommate." I swallowed

bitter waves of jealousy. But Bella was shy, and she'd make friends more easily living on campus.

That's when she realized I was serious. "Jane! What are you talking about? You have to come with me!"

I'd flinched at the half-panicked, half-pissed tone. "I don't, actually," I forced myself to say. "You're the one with the scholarship. I don't even have an acceptance letter. I'll just come later. God! It's no big deal!"

We didn't speak to one another the day she left. I thought we'd make up right away, but Bella did get overwhelmed with her classes and the new living environment. I got overwhelmed with Greta's health care and balancing a variety of jobs. So we didn't talk. At all.

Missing Bella was like missing a limb those first few months, but I figured we'd patch things up whenever I could get to Madison to visit her or whenever she came home to visit.

Christmas, I figured. Christmas for sure.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

But at the holidays, Kelly was very tenuous in her recovery. If I took my eyes off her for more than a day or two, I was sure she'd relapse. So no traveling for me, but I was positive that all would be forgiven as soon as Bella crossed the threshold of Greta's house for the holiday break. But at the last moment, she invited Greta to spend the holiday with her out of town. A pattern that was repeated every single year.

I certainly never meant to stay in Falworth forever. But Kelly and Greta both needed me. Money came and went, and there was never very much. I picked up shifts; I took night classes at the local tech college; I dated.

Someone needed to help with the shop. With winter chores. When Greta fell on the ice and got a concussion. When one of Kelly's friends convinced her to go on a road trip and she managed not to relapse—but she did call me from the side of the road in Iowa and asked me to pick her up before she made a bad decision.

Part of me wanted to explain all of this to whoever cared to listen, and part of me wanted to give the finger to anyone who dared to ask. I didn't mean to stay forever, but time just kept passing. My teenage dreams didn't make sense anymore, and this wasn't the kind of town that inspired a lot of new ideas.

I wasn't scared, Bella, but I did get stuck.

### Chapter Eighteen

December 20 came and went. Nate texted and called several times, but I never responded. I should have been a grown-up, picked up the phone, and just told him that I was no longer interested. But I was not a good liar. If I actually spoke to him, it

would be obvious that I was still very interested. Luckily, my brain was able to overrule my mushy feelings.

Michael could do whatever he wanted with Bella, but I was done contributing to my own heartbreak.

Nate wasn't the only one I was avoiding. Bella had left several messages, first just asking me to call her back and then reminding me about Greta's Christmas Eve wish. I deleted the messages without responding. I really had to just wait them both out. The end of the year was coming quickly, and then I wouldn't have to deal with either of them at all. As it was, I'd limit our interactions strictly to Single Bellsevents. Neither of them would attempt any super-personal conversation with so many other people and cameras around.

I took on a crazy amount of extra shifts at the resort on the twentieth and twenty-first, simply sleeping in the employee breakroom between them. Because it was efficient. Because I shouldn't have been driving the forty minutes home when I was exhausted. It was for safety reasons—not because I was avoiding the parking lot of my own apartment building. Thank goodness Sean and Bruce loved one another so much. I'm sure they were both enjoying the multi-day sleepover.

At my request, Sean met me at the area's one Starbucks to plan for the next web series event. "This would have been a loteasier at your kitchen table," he grumbled, trying to find a power outlet for his laptop.

I let the comment slide and brought up the weather app on my phone. "It's looking good for a beach bonfire, thank God. Not too windy and not too cold."

We spent the next couple of minutes debating how the cameramen might best avoid tripping into the actual fire and other logistics. Carol had arranged for a local band to play bluegrass music and a catering service to serve drinks. We hadn't opened the

event to the general public, but we'd invited all of the Falworth small business owners and their extended families.

We'd decided on the beach venue to remind viewers how close Falworth was to the lake. Single Bell participants had been instructed to talk about all the wonderful water sports and activities they took advantage of in warmer weather. "We'll prime the pump for summer tourism," Carol insisted.

Sean emitted a long-suffering sigh. "Carol also reminded the group to mention the NYE party at every possible opportunity because she wants to start selling tickets immediately after the bonfire. She and Jim have figured out the booze situation, but she hasn't decided on a venue yet. Apparently, nothing in Falworth is upscale enough for her 'vision.' She's got her heart set on the ballroom of the Wontana Yacht Club, and she's negotiating the rate."

"I know, I know." I sighed. She'd been blowing up our group texts constantly, driving everyone crazy with pictures of gold and black decorations, candlelit highboy tables, and freakin' cocktail shrimp.

Sean pointed a finger in my face. "You need to talk her out of the black-tie dress code. There's no way we're gonna get people wearing tuxedos."

I laugh-groaned. "Done. I will get her to downshift to cocktail attire."

"Even that's a stretch for people around here," Sean said.

He was absolutely right, but... "The party isn't for people around here. It's for tourists who expect to dress up and have champagne on New Year's Eve."

All right. Couldn't avoid it anymore. It was time to focus back on the dates. I pulled up the dashboard for the series. "Viewing numbers look good," I said approvingly.

He smiled. “People loved the Diane and Tripp ice-skating spectacle.”

Of course they did. They also ate up Tripp’s post-date plea to the camera in which he’d begged for viewers to vote them paired again. “She’s the most incredible woman I’ve ever dated,” he’d gushed.

I braced myself. “So, what are the pairings for our penultimate episode?”

Sean cracked his knuckles, prolonging my anticipation. “Diane and Tripp, naturally. Then, our usuals: Jim and Nicole, Bella and Michael.”

So that only left... “Am I with Brian?” I asked, hope clear in my voice.

Sean shook his head. “No. Brian’s with Mabel. I thought you’d be happy about that,” he exclaimed, when my face fell.

“I am happy. For them,” I clarified. “But that means I’m with Nate.”

Sean’s eyebrows rose almost to his hairline. “Kind of thought you’d be happy about that too, given the sounds coming from his apartment a few nights ago.”

Oh God. I knew our tryst in the shower stall had been too loud. “Not another word,” I warned.

\*

Monday, December 22—Single Bells—Date 5—Beach Bonfire

Pairings:

Bella and Michael

Nicole and Jim

Diane and Tripp

Mabel and Brian

Jane and Nate

“You’re going to freeze in that,” Kelly warned, and I almost laughed because it was such a mom thing to say and she generally didn’t make many mom-comments.

I smoothed the short black skirt over the patterned tights and shoved my feet into the high-heeled ankle boots. “If I stay near the fire, I’ll be fine.”

Kelly took a sip of her seltzer water and frowned at me in the mirror. “Why are you borrowing my clothes? You never borrow my clothes.”

“I was running late, and your place was closer,” I fibbed. I just didn’t want to run into Nate at the apartment building if I stopped by to get clothes.

“And you hate high heels.” As if to prove her point, I almost rolled an ankle walking from her bedroom to the bathroom to apply black eyeliner.

“Any woman who wears high heels during the Wisconsin winter is taking her life into her hands,” I mumbled.

Light flurries were falling as I parked my truck near the beach. They crusted the ground with a thin white layer that these stupid boots were no match for. Instead of marching up like a woman in charge, I slipped and skidded like a little kid.

The fire was fully blazing, and Carol was tending to it like Hestia. “Take charge of the cameramen, Jane,” she called, frowning. “They’re a little overexcited about the open bar.”

The cameramen indeed were gathered around the table covered with bottles of wine and liquor. As I watched, they did a collective shot of whiskey. I gave snake eyes to Sean. He rolled his back at me, but then gathered the guys up and directed them to various points that would be advantageous for getting footage of the lakefront. Once the couples paired up, they’d divide and conquer to record conversations.

As I spouted drivel about the New Year’s Eve party in my confessional, I saw the rest of our scrappy crew of daters arrive, all dressed more sensibly than me. I caught a glimpse of both Bella and Nate striding over, so I slid away from the area as fast as I could on my heels. I couldn’t hide from Nate forever, but I could probably stay away from him until the cameras were rolling. Not that there were that many places to go. I ended back at the bar, pretending to be fascinated with the labels on the cheap bottles of wine.

I experimented with a sip of Cabernet, and it was so awful I almost spit it out. I knew our budget was running low, butew.



“Give me a shot of whiskey instead,” I said to the bartender impulsively. I never drank hard liquor because...well, Kelly. But I was so anxious to be around Nate all night, I needed something. The first one went down with a nice burn, so I had another. Before chugging half a beer.

It all went to my head almost immediately, which is when I realized I hadn't eaten since breakfast. Great move, Jane. I'd probably end up puking in the bonfire. A trashy townie, after all.

“Cameras start rolling in five,” Carol announced.

My gaze slid automatically to Nate. He was seated on the stool, talking into the camera. But then he turned his jaw so his eyes burned straight to mine. I turned my face away and strode clumsily to the perimeter of the cleared area, staring out at the lake.

Most of the docks had been pulled onshore for the winter, but we were near a municipal pier that stayed in the water year-round. The water was shallow here at the shore and lightly frozen all the way down. At the end of the pier, the water was about ten feet deep and there were a couple of inches of ice on the surface but cold water rushing underneath. Farther out in the depths, the color of the unfrozen lake changed from a whitish blue to a deep navy.

Even though it was a stark landscape, with no softening foliage from the surrounding winter-naked trees, it was still beautiful.

“It's quite lovely, isn't it?” Nate's quiet voice echoed the thoughts in my mind. “Good evening, Jane.”

So now he was going to be all reflective and serious? When I really, really needed that mocking edge to his voice that told me he wasn't taking any of this too seriously?

When I would have actually paid him to call me “J-Bird”?

“Hey,” I said, keeping my eyes on the water instead of turning around.

Nate moved from behind me so that he was right next to me, shoulder to shoulder. From the corner of my eyes, I could see him scanning the horizon. “So, are you going to tell me what I did wrong?”

I risked a wild glance behind me. Where were the damn cameramen? Oh—back at the bar doing a last round of shots as Carol approached with a warning finger raised.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

Nate huffed. “Silence. Great. Shall I guess then?”

I crossed my arms over my chest and shivered. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” I muttered.

“I shouldn’t have slept with you,” he said.

Well, ow. I breathed in the hurt like the crisp winter air, and it burned my lungs.

“Because,” he went on. “For some unknown reason, you now think that’s all I wanted. Which is bullshit and ridiculous, Jane.”

“I’m not mad because we slept together!” I’d meant to remain silent until we were safely being recorded, but the words popped out of their own accord. I’d loved our night together. It was the hottest, sweetest one I’d ever had. My mind couldn’t stop replaying it. I’d pictured Nate’s dark eyes staring into mine as I’d straddled him on the chair. The way he’d held me after, clutching me to him with both arms while breathing in my hair. The way his lips had curved into a sleepy smile when I’d kissed him goodbye.

“Why are you mad then?”

Because you’re temporary. We’re temporary. Because you’ve woken me up, shaken me up. Because you’ve made the hated holiday season actually fun. Because you challenge me and you think I’m smart and capable and sexy. Because I think you’re smart and capable and sexy.

Worst of all, you've somehow made me doubt my plan. Even if I get to keep Greta's shop and become a freakin' pillar of the community and find someone kind to date...maybe that won't be enough.

When you leave, I'll be more miserable than ever.

"I'm not mad." The flat tone in my voice illuminated the lie in my words, but there was no way I was going to explain my insanity. I knew I was being unfair.

But so what? It wasn't like life was fair.

"Let's go get a drink!" I chirped. If the damn cameras weren't going to interrupt our intense little chitchat, we'd just go to them. I slip-slid in my heels, ignoring Nate's attempt to steady me by the elbow.

Once we got to the bar, a sheepish-looking cameraman raised his lens right in my face. I winked into it. "Two shots of whiskey, please," I purred to the bartender, all bad girl again.

The bartender handed over two shots, and I held one out to Nate. "I don't want that," he said, stone-faced. "I'm driving because this town doesn't have more than three Uber drivers, and everyone else must have summoned them before I could."

"Your loss." I threw a mischievous pout to the camera and did both shots myself. Ooof, that was a real nice burn. I blinked hard and licked my lips.

Then I patted Nate on the face, ignoring how good the little growth of stubble felt against my fingers. "Don't worry, you'll be back in the city with its thousands of Ubers very soon."

"Is that what this is about?" Nate demanded. "You're thinking about me going home?"

You're projecting the end of us before we've even begun?"

My mouth dropped open. Was he not aware that the cameraman had leaned in even closer? Apparently, he'd smelled the drama.

"Nate," I hissed, making a gesture toward the camera.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "Believe me, I'd prefer not to discuss this with an internet audience, but as you're not speaking to me otherwise, this is where it has to be done."

"No, it doesn't!" I screeched, already regretting the most recent shots of whiskey. I needed to be sharp for this conversation, and my edges were already dull and blurry. "We don't need to discuss anything at all."

My toes and kneecaps were numb. I stumbled toward the fire. Both Nate and the cameraman followed, damn them.

"I think we do." Nate took a deep breath, and despite myself, I stilled to listen. He had the air of someone about to confess something, and God help me, I wanted to hear everything. "I've been working with Bella again since I've been back. Suddenly, she's all about business—I think she's avoiding Michael in much the same way you've been avoiding me."

Huh? I shook my bourbon-clouded head and squinted to see Bella and Michael on the other side of the fire. They were standing silently with stiff shoulders, looking just as uncomfortable and miserable as I felt right now. For an instant, I wished I'd picked up the phone when Bella had called this week. What had happened between them since our fight in the shop the other day?

"But you know what? Despite our many looming deadlines, I can't even concentrate on work right now," Nate was saying. "I keep staring at my stupid phone, hoping

you'll text me. I move around my shitty apartment on tiptoes, hoping if I'm quiet enough I'll be able to hear you in yours."

He let out an incredulous laugh. "I'm pining for you."

Pining for me? I almost let out a swoony sigh. No one had ever pined for me before.

He must have seen me softening, because he took a step closer and stared deep into my eyes. "I've missed you, Jane."

"You've only known me for a couple of weeks," I whispered.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

A ghost of a smile turned up his lips, and he shrugged. “Just the same, I’ve missed you.” He gestured at the ever-present camera. “And I don’t care who the voters pair me with for the New Year’s Eve party. I’m kissing you at midnight. Kissing in the new year with you is the daydream my brain has been playing on repeat.”

I let that daydream seep into my brain. It was easy to picture: Nate, all dressed up in a dark suit, a champagne glass in hand, bending over to kiss me amid a loud countdown, streamers and confetti bursting into the air around us.

But it was just as easy for me to picture January 1st. Nate putting a suitcase in the trunk of his car after giving me a distracted kiss goodbye, his thoughts already moving on to the drive home, the work week ahead, what he’d order for dinner, the friends he hadn’t seen much of in December. His thoughts would be on the transition back into his real life.

Maybe it was partially the whiskey talking, but maybe it was all me. “Did it ever occur to you,” I said icily, “that I don’t want to kiss in the new year with someone who’s going to leave? God!” I exclaimed, way, way too loud. “I’m so tired of everybody fucking leaving me!”

Across the fire, Bella’s shocked eyes rose to meet mine. I stared at her for what felt like a month.

Eventually, Michael left her side, walking toward me. Great, just great. I was making a fool of myself. But I wasn’t going to stop. “Michael knows what I’m talkin’ ’bout,” I slurred as he approached. “We’re used to bein’ left behind, right?”

“Jane, do you want me to take you home? It’s no trouble,” Michael offered. As chivalrous and decent as it was, I saw the effort it took him to walk away from Bella, saw the way his eyes slid to hers and held. I’ll be back, he seemed to say. I’ll come back to you.

Nate ignored Michael’s offer. “If you want to go home, Jane, I’ll take you. I haven’t quite finished what I wanted to say, anyway.”

The ugly urge to fight hadn’t quite left me either. “You can go back to Bella,” I said to Michael, shooing him away. “I don’t want to suck up any of your precious remaining moments with her.”

Looking a little wounded, Michael edged away. “Don’t let her drive,” he said to Nate, as though I wasn’t standing right there.

“I don’t want to leave,” I announced. That wasn’t quite true, but I definitely didn’t want to leave with either of them. I just needed to wait awhile, until we’d gotten enough footage for the episode. Then I could bum a ride home with Sean.

“Fine, we’ll keep talking here then.” Nate’s voice was clipped. “Though you probably won’t even remember it tomorrow.”

“Oh, settle down. I’m not that drunk,” I lied.

“Super,” Nate said. “Then I can point out all the ways you’re thinking too narrowly. Yeah, I don’t live here and you do. But I don’t live in Antarctica. I am leaving after New Year’s, true, but I’d like to keep exploring whatever this is.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “We can do that, you know. We can choose to try.”

Pretty words and an even prettier sentiment. “You say that now, but it wouldn’t work.” Better words failed me. The liquor had put up a blockade between my



thoughts and my mouth.

“Why?” he asked, voice soft again. “Why do you think that?”

Um, a lifetime of experience? No one chooses me.

Jesus, how pathetic. But that was the crux of it all, wasn't it? Until a few years ago, Kelly would have picked a fifth of vodka over me every day of the week and twice on Sunday. My best friend in the world had left town without looking back—and had never come home to see me. Not in more than a decade. Even my beloved Greta—well, she would have chosen Bella over me every time. I didn't blame her for loving her granddaughter, but Christ, it sure hurt to never be someone's first choice.

“No one chooses me,” I mouthed into the fire.

“What?” Nate asked, impatience and worry etched into the faint lines around his face. “What did you say?”

I shook my dizzy head, almost enjoying the way it made little starbursts appear at the corners of my vision. “Nothing.” Suddenly, the heat of the fire was making me nauseous. I wanted away from it. And Nate. And the camera. Everyone.

“I need to be alone,” I said, spacing out each word distinctly to make sure I sounded in control. “I'll get a ride home from Sean or Carol.” I gave Nate a vague, dismissive smile that didn't match the pinching sensation in my chest and throat. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye?” he echoed, incredulous and angry. “As in goodbye for tonight or goodbye for good?”

“For good,” I said quickly, before my brain or heart could override the whiskey. I waved my hands between us. “Whatever we were, it's over.” My voice was clogged

with tears but certainly clear enough for him to hear.

His head snapped back as though I'd slapped him. "Over?"

For a minute, I thought he was going to follow me. But I made a firm "you stay put" gesture to both him and the cameramen, and they actually obeyed, for once.

I strode away determinedly, only to realize once again that there weren't many places to hide at a beach bonfire. I didn't want to talk to any of the other web series participants, and I could seriously not handle any of Carol's logistics or planning right now. My head was spinning and my heart was aching and I just wanted space and silence.

My gaze focused on the pier in the distance. Oh, that would be perfect. It was completely empty right now, and if I walked to the edge, I'd get a panoramic view of the quiet lake. The air would be fresh and free of the thick ash of the fire. Surely, out there my head would clear up and my chest would stop hurting and my stomach would stop lurching.

Back at the fire, Brian and Mabel had approached Nate, and the cameraman had refocused on their conversation. Nate wasn't watching me walk away—which was a good thing, I told myself. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I shuffled out onto the pier, sliding on the thin layer of snow in the heeled boots like they were skates. The farther out I walked, the more the noise from the fire faded and the wind picked up, blowing my hair across my face and blinding me. I let it.

Along with my hair, the wind whipped the falling snow onto my cheeks. They'd be red as strawberries from windburn tomorrow. What was I thinking to not even wear a scarf tonight? My thighs were completely numb beneath the thin patterned tights. Maybe I should return to the warmth of the fire.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

But I couldn't. I just wanted the night to be over. The month to be over. When the holidays were over and life got back to normal, I'd feel...

Well, I didn't know how I'd feel. After Greta's death this fall, I'd mostly vacillated between deep grief and overwhelming numbness. At some point, I'd refocused on my promise to her and my plan. What needed to change in my day-to-day life to make it better. Concentrating on those three steps had made some of the grief fade because they were so simple and clear: I'd promised Greta I'd make my life better. I'd follow her framework. I'd be happier.

But now things weren't simple anymore. Everything was blurry.

The wind blew stronger with every step I slid now, and the snow and hair flew in a steady stream, right across my field of vision. How far out had I walked anyway?

I finally pulled my freezing hands out of my pockets to try to gather my hair away from my face. Oh wow, I was right at the edge of the far end of the pier. Between the blowing snow and setting sun, the visibility was much worse than I'd expected.

A blast of strong wind knocked me a few inches to the left, a feeling of vertigo channeling through my inner ears and down my nose. The whiskey roiled hard in my stomach, and I bent in half, taking in deep draws of breath through my nose until the sick feeling passed. You're OK. You're OK. Oh God, were any of the cameras filming me right now?

The thought made me shoot straight up, which was a terrible, terrible idea. Black spots danced at the edges of my vision and the sudden shift in weight made me slide

backward on the skinny heels. I lost my balance completely.

Falling on my butt on the pier would have been bad enough. But I was out on the very end, and I went right off the edge, breaking the ice and plunging into the depths of the frigid winter water.

## Chapter Nineteen

One Saturday morning in January of every year, the hearty folks of Falworth arranged a polar plunge in which residents egged each other on to jump into the lake. Bella and I had participated a few times in our teens—a misguided effort to show how tough we were.

So this wasn't the first time I'd been underwater in the winter lake.

But jumping in the water on a bright morning in your bathing suit in front of a group of cheering goofballs who were ready to yank you back out as soon as you surfaced and rush you to warmth and breakfast was very different than what was happening right now.

The shock of it came close to stealing my sanity. One moment I'd been standing on the pier pouting and contemplating the next steps of my life, and the next I was swallowed whole.

By lake water so cold it leached every sensible thought from my head. As my body temperature plummeted, the only thought in my head was "Oh. Fuck. Cold."

I'd fallen in with some velocity, my right hip hitting the ice layer first and smashing through it. Now I was sinking, down, down, down. The water was ruthless and thick. My muscles went completely still and my lungs seized.

Jane!

I didn't know if it was an actual voice or just my own brain screaming at me to react, but I finally jolted from my shocky stupor.

I thrashed in the water, Kelly's puffy jacket hampering my movements. Calm down. The water was only about ten feet deep here. I just needed to push off the bottom or kick my way to the surface. If the pier was too high for me to heave myself out, I could still grab on to it and monkey-crawl my way to the shore. It would be difficult and humiliating, but not life-threatening. I reached up my hands to the surface and kicked with both feet.

I didn't move.

I kicked again and pushed my arms down hard, trying to propel myself upward—but it didn't work.

Panic got its teeth in me now, and I thrashed again, feeling a horrifying pinch in my lungs. I was running out of air. Something had my right foot! I could kick cleanly with my left, but my right was stuck fast by some underwater debris.

Oh my God. I couldn't swim. I reached up to the sky in vain—I couldn't get to the surface. I couldn't get free!

My brain was so crazed that at first I thought I'd imagined it, a brushing of hands against mine.

But no! I felt it again. It was real! Strong, warm hands tugging on mine. Hard yanks. Someone was trying to pull me out. Bubbles frothed from my lips as most of my remaining air escaped. Hurry, my brain screamed.

The hands couldn't pull me up. I was well and truly stuck. And I was starting to not feel the cold anymore.

Whoosh! A big disturbance in the water next to me. Underwater splashing sounds echoed in my ears and water rushed hard against my face. Someone had jumped in after me, I realized, with faint astonishment.

Thank God. Thank God. I didn't think anyone had even seen me on the pier. Who had followed me? Nate? Had he been worried when I hadn't returned to the fire? Or maybe Michael. He was always very concerned about water safety and wouldn't have liked to see my drunk ass stumbling on the pier.

Now, the strong hands were patting my body and tugging. With my tiniest bit of remaining strength, I grabbed the hands and put them on my right thigh. Thank God the person understood and started yanking hard at my stuck leg.

It wouldn't budge.

Oh God, the person needed to get away from me before they got hypothermia too. If I couldn't be saved, I didn't want to take someone else down with me. I pushed at the person with the last of my strength, trying to shove them up to the surface.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

But they didn't leave—they just changed tactics.

The hands stopped tugging and moved down my thigh, to my knee, to my calf, to my ankle—oh! Trying to investigate the cause of the hold on me. Smart, my brain mused from a long distance away.

Everything was kind of tunneling out now. I was vaguely aware of my chest screaming in pain and the fact that I couldn't feel any of my extremities. But mostly there was blackness seeping in from the corners, about to overtake every thought.

The hands were furiously tugging at something I couldn't feel. My foot, maybe?

Suddenly, I could feel a change near my foot. Like my toes were stabbed with needles. And there was a...loosening. An arm wrapped around my chest, and I was being tugged to the surface.

I was free!

I was too cold to move my arms or legs so I went as limp as possible and allowed my rescuer to pull me up. When my face broke to the air, my lips parted. I needed air, but I was overcome by racking coughs and some horrible choking.

“Please breathe.”

I managed to gasp in some air. The intake was so high-pitched it sounded like a scream.

“That’s it. Again,” the voice said. I was still being held aloft by their arms. “Your b-boot was stuck under a b-branch. Just h-had to unz-zip and g-get your f-foot out of it.”

With another gulp of air, my head began to clear, and I opened my eyes.

Bella clung to me with one arm, the other clutching the pier with a white, frozen-clawed hand.

Bella?

Bella was the one who saved me? Bella jumped off the pier into the winter water—by herself. There was no one else on the pier. She must have seen me fall and sprinted straight to me.

She was the one who wouldn’t leave me when I was stuck.

Her lips were cobalt. It was strangely pretty. Of course Bella would look pretty half-drowned. “Hey, Bells,” I said in wonder. “Your lips match your eyes.”

For the rest of my life, I’d remember the relief that settled over my childhood friend’s face in this moment. The laughter that cackled out of her. “J-Bird, you aresuchan idiot.”

## Chapter Twenty

You’ll be spendingChristmas Eve together this year. A sleepover in the house. Talk all night and toast me with mimosas on Christmas morning. \*That\* is the life celebration I want.

I climbed the stairs to Greta’s house, breathing deeply to counteract the twinge in my



chest. I hadn't been over here since she passed. Bella had been staying here all month—how could she stand it?

But Bella's relationship with Greta in the last decade had taken place outside of this house. They'd taken dozens of trips together and celebrated holidays out of town. The last time Bella spent significant time in this house had been before college, so it made sense that grief didn't knock her sideways.

I'd been in and out of this house on a daily basis for much of my life and especially in the last several years when Greta needed so much care. I could hear her voice in every room, hear her footstep around every corner.

"Merry Christmas," Bella said as she opened the door. Her hair was loose on her shoulders, and she wore a long maroon sweater over gray flannel pajama pants.

I shifted the overnight bag on my shoulder and held up Greta's favorite bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon in one hand and a grocery bag full of snacks in the other. "I brought provisions."

We hadn't really spoken since she fished me from the depths of the lake two days ago. We'd been too weak to pull ourselves out of the water, but Michael had heard our shouts and came running. Then the entire population of the bonfire camerunning, including the cameramen. Since I'd been too out of it to edit footage the last couple of days, I'd briefly worried about my fall ending up in the Single Bell episode. But Carol had let me know that they'd made an executive decision to cut any mention of the incident. If the goal of the web series was to increase tourism, we certainly didn't need to showcase my dumb-ass behavior that highlighted danger.

My ill-advised little swim had given me a brief fever and cold symptoms, so I'd spent most of the time since then sleeping. In my brief waking moments, I saw Nate's frantic eyes when he'd run out onto the pier and the way he'd whipped off his coat

and wrapped me in it before Michael insisted on driving Bella and me to the hospital, just to be safe.

Can we talk on New Year's Eve?

That's what I'd texted him yesterday. I didn't necessarily have any more clarity on my feelings about us than I had at the bonfire, but I owed him a much better explanation. As well as an apology for being so shitty and hurtful.

He hadn't responded.

As I followed Bella back to the kitchen, I wished I knew more about Nate's Christmas plans. Did he have Chicago holiday traditions with friends? Did he ever go back to England for Christmas? Did members of his huge family come here? You'd know all the answers to these questions if you'd just behaved like a sane human being and went out on a date with him when he'd asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

Indeed. But as Bella had pointed out in the lake, I was an idiot.

Bella pulled two wineglasses from a kitchen cabinet, and I uncorked the bottle. I threw chips in bowls while Bella sliced some cheese and arranged it on a plate with crackers.

Then we sat down at the same table where Greta had confessed her diagnosis to me all those years ago. I picked up a cracker and played with it.

“I’m just going to start talking,” Bella said abruptly. “There’s so much important stuff between us, Jane. We’ve been angry with one another for so long, I don’t know where to begin or how to do this. So let me get it out.”

I put the cracker back on the plate and took a gulp of wine instead. “OK.”

Her lips trembled. “I’ve been going through paperwork in Greta’s office. Credit card statements. Health insurance claims. Summaries from medical visits.”

Her eyes filled, and she took a deep breath through her nose. “I don’t expect you to believe me, but I didn’t know. I had no idea she had cancer my freshmen year of college. I had no idea she’d been so sick for the last couple of years.”

The tears spilled down her cheeks, and she swiped at them with impatient fingers. “It was wrong of her not to tell me,” she whispered. “I’m trying not to be mad at her, but I’m hurt and confused.”

She swallowed hard. “I finally understand why you’ve been so furious with me all

this time, though. There were no bills for in-home nursing help. No credit card charges for Uber for all of the doctor's appointments and different kinds of therapy, and she couldn't have driven herself."

Tentatively, she reached over to my free hand, but instead of squeezing it, she withdrew her own to her lap. "You took care of her. All this time. You must have thought I was a monster for not being here. That's why you called me selfish when we fought last week. But I swear to God, Jane, I truly didn't know."

Her self-loathing made my blood curdle. It wasn't her fault, and it was time for me to talk now.

"I knew she didn't tell you," I admitted. "I didn't necessarily agree with her, but it was her private medical information, and I respected her right to share or not share."

Bella's wet eyes grew wider and more confused.

"She was just so damn proud of you, Bells," I tried to explain. "At first of your engineering scholarship. Then of your big career and everything you were creating and working toward."

I sighed and took another gulp of wine. "She loved this town, but she knew there weren't opportunities for you here. She knew you deserved the top-tier education, that you'd make the most of it. She spoke to anyone who would listen about your consulting job. Then about how you were designing a software product all on your own."

More tears dripped down Bella's face. "She shouldn't have made that decision for me. I should have been here, helping you both."

To hell with it. I reached over and squeezed her trembling hand. "It would have made

her miserable if you gave up your life to take care of her.” How could I explain this better? “You living your dream—that was Greta’s dream.”

Bella nodded slowly, a familiar kind of wearied resignation on her face. An uneasy trickle of guilt slithered down my spine. I’d been jealous of Bella for so many years for getting out of here and living a bigger life, but I’d never considered that carrying the weight of others’ dreams was not easy.

“What about what you gave up though?” She squinted at me. “That wasn’t fair of her to ask that of you.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “But I didn’t have the same starting place. You had a real shot because of your scholarship. My path would have been much harder.”

I thought back to that kitchen table conversation with Greta—and what had happened earlier that same evening. “I didn’t only stay for Greta. Kelly needed me too.”

“You said something about that in the shop.” Bella’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why didn’t you tell me, Jane? I would have tried to help!”

My cheeks burned. “I was embarrassed,” I whispered. “You and Greta had done so much for us already. I was so embarrassed that Kelly couldn’t pull it together. That I couldn’t make her pull it together.”

Get even deeper. Get to the core. “This wasn’t long after your mom didn’t invite us to her wedding. Because we were so trashy. I was afraid—” I swallowed over a lump of old humiliation. “I was afraid if I told you about it, you’d start to see me that way too.”

Bella’s mouth dropped open and her eyes blazed. “Why would you think that about me? I never would have thought less of you if I knew Kelly was having trouble! You

were my best friend! My sister! Do you know how much I've missed you?"

A tiny spark of leftover anger ignited in spite of the sodden emotion coursing through my veins. "Then why did you never come visit me, Bella?" I waved my hands dramatically. "I've been here the entire time."

Her eyes flared. "I invited you to come on trips with me and Greta! For years, I asked—you always said no."

More heat flamed on my cheeks as I stared down at the table. "I couldn't afford those trips."

"I wanted to pay for you like I paid for Greta!" she yelled. "I told you that!"

"I didn't want your money!" I yelled back. "I'm not your grandmother, and I'm not a charity case!"

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

I forced myself to stop hollering before our screeching shattered Greta's glass bowls. "You could have come here. To see me."

It scratched me raw to admit this, but if we were laying everything on the table... "That's the real reason I've been angry. I understood and could forgive you for leaving, but it broke my heart that you never—"

My voice broke and I stopped fighting the tears. Bella looked absolutely horrified, and I didn't blame her. I didn't cry pretty. I snort-sobbed. Tears erupted in angry little bursts, and my eyes went from zero to swollen red tunnels in about twenty seconds.

When I finally calmed down, Bella closed her eyes and spoke through her teeth. "My mom didn't acknowledge me at her wedding. Like, there was literally no mention of the fact I was her daughter. Not in the speeches or the toasts. I wasn't part of the wedding procession. I had no role in the ceremony."

I blinked. Hiccapped. Remembered how excited Bella was when Angela called Greta to tell her about the engagement. "Do you think I'll be a bridesmaid?" she'd squealed. When Kelly and I had been cut from the guest list, we didn't talk about the wedding anymore, but I'd always assumed that Bella had been a part of the event somehow.

"The only time she even spoke to me was in the receiving line." Bella's voice was cold and hollow. "She said 'thank you for coming' to me, like I was a distant cousin, and then she greeted the person in line behind me."

Jesus. I pictured vulnerable, teenage Bella's face crumpling, and fresh tears flooded my eyes.

She shook her head, hard. “I didn’t come back home because of my mom. It just hurts. To realize again and again that I’m a part of her life she wishes simply didn’t happen. That she doesn’t want—has never wanted—a relationship with me.”

She half sighed, half moaned. “But instead of learning from that hurt, I let it ruin the other most important relationship in my life. You’re absolutely right, and I’m absolutely wrong.”

She swirled the wine in her glass and met my eyes. “I should have come back to see you, to repair us. Honestly? I think you are the real reason I came home this time. After everything that happened this fall, I was feeling so lost. I felt like I needed to come home to Falworth to find myself again. But it wasn’t the town I was coming home to. It was you.”

God, I didn’t even know I could cry this hard silently. It certainly hadn’t ever happened before.

Bella inhaled through her nose. “But I’m about a decade too late, aren’t I? I’m so sorry, Jane.” She set the wineglass on the table without taking a sip. “You hit the bull’s-eye the other day when you called me selfish. I’m—”

“Overdoing the apology,” I interrupted, with as much sass as I could muster through the tears. Her mouth twitched like she didn’t know whether to cry or smile. I huffed and pushed the wineglass at her mouth until she sipped.

“We both know we’re both to blame here,” I grumbled. “You hit the bull’s-eye too, you know. Maybe circumstances required me to give up the life I’d planned all those years ago, but maybe I’ve also been scared to climb out of my rut.”

A minute passed. We both took another swallow of the wine. “So where do we go from here?” Bella asked. “What happens now?”



Duh. “We stop being selfish and we stop being scared.”

She grinned at me. Hesitated before asking: “Do we start being friends again?”

I could feel Greta holding her breath. Without a doubt, I knew that this was the real reason we were in this house tonight. We never could have properly celebrated Greta without reconciling.

“Yeah.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

“How can there possibly be another Christmas Village or Single Bell emergency?” I stomped next to Bella through the center of town on our way to the diner. “Carol’s gone off the deep end.”

Bella yawned. “At least she let everyone get through Christmas in peace.”

True. And what a Christmas it had been. Bittersweet, yes, but still my favorite one since childhood. After Bella and I had waded through our sordid crap and decided on forgiveness and friendship, we’d stayed up all night on Christmas Eve, just like Greta had wanted. We looked through photo albums, played all of Greta’s favorite songs on her record player, and took photos of our favorite childhood recipes from her cookbooks. We went through Greta’s closet, crying together as we folded up her clothes and carefully packaged mementos.

We slept half of Christmas Day before eating brunch late in the afternoon. “So here’s a secret,” Bella had announced. “I’m really into Michael.”

I’d scrunched my nose. “That’s not a secret, Bells. You’ve been dating him in front of thousands of people.”

She'd taken a deep breath. "I think I'm in love with him, Jane. For real."

Now that I hadn't expected. "What does that mean?" I asked slowly.

"I don't know, exactly. I just know that I want to try with him," she said, in a weird callback to Nate's phrasing at the bonfire. "It means spending more time in Falworth since this is where Michael lives. I'll need to travel for work occasionally, but I'm not tethered to an office location. I've loved living in Chicago, and I'm not sure I want to give that up. So maybe Michael will need to be flexible too. Spend time there with me."

Bella and Michael. The high school loves trying on a grown-up relationship. Wow, this was huge. But they'd looked so miserable together the night I'd fallen in the lake. "Why did you guys seem so tense at the bonfire then?"

She'd sighed into her pancakes. "Because I was convinced there needed to be a simple solution and I couldn't think of one." She shrugged, looking excited and determined. "But after I jumped in the lake, things seemed much clearer. Why does there have to be a simple solution? Life isn't simple—ever. Maybe we find a complicated solution."

A complicated solution. I kinda liked that.

“Ooh!” I’d exclaimed. “Can you tell him that you love him during the Single Bellsfinale? Imagine what that would do for ratings!”

Bella had snorted and thrown a pancake at me. Then she’d driven straight to Michael’s house and professed her feelings in front of his Christmas tree. When she’d returned home to Greta’s, her hair was mussed and her cheeks were rubbed red from Michael’s beard scruff.

Now, I saw Michael heading to the diner from the opposite direction. He beamed as he caught sight of us, and Bella let out a breathless little sigh. “You guys are gross,” I muttered, hiding a smile.

In the empty diner, I plopped on the counter between Jim and Diane. Bella and Michael cozied up in a booth. Uncharacteristically quiet, Carol filled everyone’s coffee mugs.

I cut to the chase. “What’s wrong? Why are we here?” I looked out the window, where workers at the Christmas Village were beginning to arrive. Everything looked fine.

Carol sighed. “It’s about New Year’s Eve.”

“Do we need extra budget for the Yacht Club?” Bella asked gently. “Do you want me to call the GM and see if there’s any room for negotiation?”

Carol shook her head. “The Yacht Club has been reserved by another group,” she said grimly. “In fact, every hotel ballroom and large restaurant space in a four-town radius is also suddenly unavailable.”

“They didn’t!” Diane exclaimed, her voice tight.

“They did,” Carol confirmed.

“Who did what?” Michael asked. He and Bella exchanged confused glances.

I did a swivel and hopped off my stool as angry suspicion lowered my voice. “Is this another shitty trick from Wontana and Vienna?”

Carol put the coffeepot back on the burner with a loud thump. “Yes. They are now hosting an ultra-ritzy New Year’s Eve party at the Yacht Club—and spending a heck of a lot of money on advertisements for tickets. Somehow, they’ve also convinced the other larger event spaces not to work with us.”

Jim harumphed. “So now we’ve mentioned the New Year’s Eve party on the show, but we have nowhere to hold it?”

“Exactly.” Carol sniffed.

Oh shit. I’d checked the web series platform this morning and hundreds of our viewers were queued up to buy tickets as soon as we released the event details. Since they were planning to travel here in less than a week, it wouldn’t be hard at all for the Wontana/Vienna folks to capitalize on this and grab their dollars once we admitted we couldn’t host a party.

“If we don’t have a New Year’s party, did you all make enough revenue in December for your businesses to survive the winter?” Bella asked.

Jim blew out a long breath. “Probably?”

Diane nodded slowly in agreement. “We’ll have to tighten our belts, as always, but probably.” Her lips thinned. “God, it pisses me off that they did this though. For once, we could have had an easier winter.”

Carol looked miserable. “I was really looking forward to the party too.” The lines around her eyes deepened. “We’ve worked so hard this month. We deserved a big finale. A huge, fancy shindig to celebrate our accomplishments and each other.”

She looked at me, her mouth turned down at the corners. “I guess we should cancel the finalSingle Bellsdate. I’m sure everyone would like to find other New Year’s plans since this isn’t coming together.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa. “We are not canceling the finale,” I announced, my voice allowing no room for argument. “And we are not canceling the New Year’s Eve party.”

I did a lap around the diner, thinking furiously. “We have hundreds of people ready to party withSingle Bells, and we are NOT letting stupid Wontana and Vienna steal them.”

“J-Bird’s got an idea,” Bella sang.

Hmmm, yes. An idea was forming, and just likeSingle Bellsitself, it was a really bad one. Deliciously bad.

“We do deserve a big finale. A huge shindig to celebrate.” I glanced apologetically at Carol. “Just like you said. But it does not need to be fancy.”

I sighed dramatically and whirled in a circle, including the whole group in my

impassioned little speech. “You know what? We can’t compete with Wontana and Vienna when it comes to fancy. So let’s not try!”

I put my hands on my hips. “In fact, let’s lean in the exact opposite direction.”

Carol looked intrigued. “The opposite direction? What does that mean?”

## Page 68

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

I grinned broadly, baring my teeth. “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s going to be a very trashy new year.”

\*

Wednesday, December 31—Single Bells—Date 6—New Year’s Eve

Pairings:

Bella and Michael

Nicole and Jim

Diane and Tripp

Mabel and Brian

Jane and Nate

“Time check?” I called to Sean.

“Doors open in thirty minutes!” he yelled back, bending over his laptop.

“Copy that,” I said. “Start getting footage of Diane, Jim, and Bella since they’re here. Grab the rest as soon as they arrive.”

If they arrived. If he arrived. I hadn’t heard one word from Nate since the bonfire.

He'd probably decided not to come tonight. Oh shut up, I snapped at myself. As if Bella could read my thoughts, she swung by with a breezy "Stop freaking out. He's coming."

"Oh shut up," I snapped at her instead.

Carol bustled up, holding a clipboard and two walkie-talkies. "Jane dear, do you think we have enough kegs? I was a little unsure about that DJ Jim found, but at least he showed up on time. Did I tell you that Jeanette heard from her husband, who works on the Metra, that the train is completely full heading up here from Chicago?"

On and on she babbled out her nerves, and for once, I had no urge to cover my ears. Really, I had to hand it to Carol. For a woman who'd been obsessed with cocktail shrimp and champagne flutes, she'd downshifted to our new concept remarkably quickly.

Or maybe it was the fact that we'd sold eight hundred tickets in an hour that convinced her.

I did a scan of the huge, empty warehouse. Falworth did not have much in the way of upscale event options, that was true. But we did have plenty of unused industrial spaces. All we'd needed to do to get this place trashy-party-ready was a bit of power-washing and to turn the heat on.

Jim had stretched kegs in rows along the walls as far as the eye could see. In all four corners, makeshift bars were stood up to serve basic mixed drinks.

"Check one, check two, check three," the DJ tested his microphone and then blasted a loud metallic chord through his speakers.

Tripp skidded into the building. "Ohmigod, the line outside is ridiculous! There



musta been like a hundred people trying to take my picture!” He sauntered directly to the cameramen and flexed his biceps like he was posing in front of a mirror. Hopefully, after tonight he’d be able to readjust to normal life when he wasn’t constantly being followed by a lens.

He held up his hands before I could yell at him for being late. “I brought something for the party,” he said proudly. He waved his phone in the air. “I made a playlist of super-raunchy Christmas songs.”

I cocked my head. “You know what? Fair.” Totally within the theme of the evening. “Go share with the DJ,” I allowed.

Bella reappeared. “Michael texted that he’s five minutes away. Brian and Mabel just walked in, and Sean grabbed them. We’re totally on track.”

Sure. That was everyone. Except Nate. He’d never responded to my Can talk on New Year’s Eve?text message. Maybe he’d finally had enough of this whole circus. Maybe he’d decided we didn’t have much to talk about.

“Come to the mirrors with me,” Bella said. “You need to finish your makeup.” Rolling my eyes, I let her pull me into the Single Bells staging area. Tonight I wore a white tank top over a black bra, jeans with both knees ripped out, and big black boots. My dark hair was down and teased a little bigger than normal, à la video-vamp from the eighties.

I applied black eyeliner and bright red lips. “Done!” I announced, turning on my heel, ready to pace.

“Wait.” Bella stopped me, pulling out a slip of paper from her makeup bag. “I have a proposition for you.”

Her voice was much more serious than I'd expect prior to a raging kegger. "What is it?"

She squared her shoulders. "I am offering to buy half of your half of Greta's shop."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Wh-what?” I shook my head so hard I could smell wafts of hairspray. “Half of my half?”

“Yes.” She pressed the slip of paper between my fingers, and I realized it was a check. When I read the number on it, my eyes widened. A sizable check.

“Hear me out,” she said quickly. “You keep a piece of the shop because you should. It’s a part of your home. But that doesn’t mean you should stay and run it. I’m obviously planning to be in Falworth a lot more now—let me figure out how to keep it going. Carol and Diane are going to help.”

She smiled at my confused frown. “Jane, take the money and use it to go for the life you really want.”

“Bella...” I shook my head on autopilot. “Thank you. But no. I couldn’t. I can’t—”

“Why can’t you?” she asked, but she wasn’t really asking. “Greta is gone.”

I knew that. But there were other people who I needed to take care of too. “I’ll keep an eye on Kelly,” Bella said pre-empting my next argument. “You told me yourself that she’s got a solid support system now, Jane. Things are different than they used to be.”

I swallowed. What about...um, Sean? Of course, all I had to do was look across the room and my fears about him became ridiculous. He was directing the group of cameramen, completely in his element.

I blinked several times. Even if I didn't need to take care of people anymore, I couldn't accept this offer. Running the shop was the first step to making my life better. Wasn't it?

Bella was reading my mind again. "You've been thinking too small, JZ. I don't blame you—given what you've been dealing with up to this point, it was only natural that you were focusing on how to make life in Falworth tolerable. But you don't have to limit yourself anymore."

She put her hands on my shoulders and gave me a little shake. "Try something entirely new. Leave! Move to the city! See what else is out there for you. You can stay at my apartment in Chicago as long as you want."

Buoyed by my stunned silence, Bella kept talking. "Remember when you were drunk and trying to explain to Nate how things wouldn't work between you? You kept thinking that no one chooses you."

"I can't believe I told you that," I muttered.

In my defense, having a best friend again after a decade of abstinence was super-intoxicating. Bella and I were talking every day all day about everything. In fact, I now knew so much about Michael's bedroom moves that I couldn't make eye contact with him.

"Here's the thing, Jane." Bella stared me down, pinning me with her huge eyes. "Right now, the person who needs to choose you is you."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

It didn't takelong to realize the New Year's Eve party was going to be an enormous success. The DJ found his groove right away, alternating between dirty Christmas

songs, good old-fashioned rock ‘n’ roll, hair band music, and country anthems. The Satin Ladies walked the warehouse floor like it was a catwalk, drawing eyes and admirers, dispensing Jell-O shots with authority and attitude.

Partygoers gaped and pointed at our Single Bells contestants, reminding me of wide-eyed tourists on safari witnessing animals walking in the wild. Bolder visitors grabbed the web series participants for selfies. Michael kept a protective arm around Bella as they dutifully beamed into photo after photo. Tripp proudly escorted Diane around the warehouse, whispering things in her ear.

Nicole was standing with a group of her girlfriends. As I watched, Jim brought her a red Solo cup of beer. She accepted it with a smile, and he nodded and walked away. A group of tourists sighed audibly like it had been an epic romantic moment.

“Jane!” Brian rushed up to me, looking handsome in jeans and his typical flannel.

“Hey!” We gave each other a brief hug. “What’s up?”

His eyes were a bit wild. “My ex showed up. Here. Tonight.”

My mouth dropped open. “Really? Wow.” I gave him an impressed nod. “I guess the whole making-her-jealous tactic really worked.” I was happy for him, but oh. My heart ached a bit for Mabel. I sure hoped Brian had been as open with her about the reason he’d participated in the show as he’d been with me. “That’s great.”

But he stayed silent, his eyebrows low over his hooded eyes. I angled my head. “Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know!” he exclaimed. “That’s all I wanted when we started, but now...”

Aw. “Mabel?” I asked.

He flushed and shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Maybe. I don’t know! I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

I grabbed a tray of red Jell-O shots from a passing Satin Lady and handed one to him. “I don’t have any answers for you, my friend. Just...” I thought hard and sighed. “Be honest with yourself about what—or who—you want. Be brave enough to go for it.”

Brian did the Jell-O shot, looking ridiculous. “Honest and brave,” he muttered. “Honest and brave.” I saluted him as he walked away. He looked like a man headed for the gallows rather than two interested women.

Carol appeared in front of me, staring down at her phone and cackling. “Give me one of those!” she demanded. And then she did two red Jell-O shots.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

I gaped at her. “Carol! Have you finally lost it?”

She just beamed at me. “I am celebrating, Jane. I just got word that the Wontana Yacht Club NYE party sold a measly seventy-five tickets. I also hear that it’s a completely boring party. The same boring people standing around talking about the same boring things.”

She spun in a giddy circle, looking ten years younger than the woman who’d been bossing us around like a drill sergeant for the last month. “Look what we’ve done! Look at all these happy people.” She winked at me. “Look at the Falworth Small Business Association’s bank account!”

She reached for a third Jell-O shot, but I shoved the tray into the hands of a passing Lady before she could grab one. “Hold up, wild woman. Go get a bottle of water before you down another one of those,” I said sternly.

Carol grabbed my face with both hands and gave me a smack on the lips. “Will do. Greta would be so dang proud of you—you know that, kiddo?”

I swallowed over the lump in my throat and checked in with the cameramen for a few minutes. They didn’t need to film all night. As long as they got final footage of the paired couples and a bunch of shots of the party, Single Bell was a wrap. We’d edit the last episode to include clips of the whole month so it would be a nice series summary. “Another half hour and you guys can just join the party, OK?” They nodded gratefully.

Sean showed me his phone. “We’ve gone viral. #TrashyNewYear is trending on

Twitter. Rumor has it that @RozNGod is actually here somewhere.”

Going viral certainly wouldn’t hurt tourism. I put my hands on my hips and surveyed the huge, crazy scene. Carol was right; we’d done this. I’d done this. My silly idea—combined with Bella’s cash and a lot of hard work from everyone—had saved the town through winter.

I was rather competent, wasn’t I? And competence was a very mobile attribute.

Lost in thoughts of the future, I almost missed the dramatic throat-clear behind me.

“You know, this is quite the filthiest Christmas song I’ve ever heard.”

He came! I closed my eyes briefly and then turned to face Nate with a raised eyebrow and cocky jut of my hip.

His dark eyes glinted, and he gave me a flash of teeth. “Seriously, J-Bird, are you listening to these lyrics? I’m certain he just sang a lewd analogy: ‘I’ll fill your stocking with my candy cane of joy.’”

Thanks, Tripp. I snorted. “Classy tune for a classy party.”

I narrowed my eyes at Nate. “I’ve just realized something. I never see you coming. You always, always sneak up behind me. Is that difficult?”

Nate gasped a surprised laugh, and a sheen covered his eyes. “Actually, it is,” he admitted. “I have to find you in the crowd without you seeing me first. Then I determine a path to your rear, which is challenging because you rarely stop moving. The final step is finding the perfect angle to stand behind you when I speak. A spot where you can’t see me but I can see your face.”



I couldn't believe he actually copped to doing it on purpose. "Why bother?"

His smile became softer. "I like catching you off guard."

His voice went to a whisper. "I like to see the way your body changes when you hear my voice. Your breath catches. Sometimes you close your eyes. Sometimes your cheeks go the tiniest bit pink. Like now."

"Maybe I'm just hot." Embarrassed, I brought my hands to my face.

But he caught my wrists en route and held them. My heart began to pound hard, rushing blood through my veins so quickly that every inch of my body felt tingly and on alert.

He eyed me closely, his gaze raking me from head to toe. "You look gorgeous tonight." A line creased between his eyes. "No lasting effects from your hop in the lake?"

I rolled my eyes, shifted my weight. "Just eternal embarrassment."

He gave me a mock-stern look. "I don't believe I shall ever be a party to you doing whiskey shots again."

"Trust me, lesson learned." I would have danced away, given him some sort of feisty, nonchalant gesture, but he was still holding my wrists. My body was trapped by the rising tension between us.

"I was scared you weren't coming," I admitted quietly.

His grip on my wrists tightened. "I was scared you didn't want me to come."

The song changed to something with a low, thudding beat. We stared at each other, the air between us going thick and heavy, making it completely obvious that his fear was unfounded. He tugged me an inch closer. “Do I need to wait until midnight to kiss you?” he asked, his voice low, gravelly, and urgent.

God, I loved that he wanted to kiss me so much. I licked my lips and flexed the wrists that were in his grip. No, I didn’t want him to wait for “Auld Lang Syne.” I wanted him to settle his mouth on mine now, to stand on my tiptoes, put my arms around his neck and press my body against his from head to toe.

But.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

“You don’t have to wait until midnight,” I said, gently extricating myself from his hold, taking a big step backward, and bursting our lust-bubble. “But you do have to listen to me talk first. Sorry.”

“Never apologize for that.” Nate flashed his easy grin and rocked backward on his heels. “Listening to you is one of my favorite things. Perhaps I haven’t been clear enough on how much I hang on every word that comes from your mouth.”

“We’ll see,” I said simply. “C’mon.”

I led him to a corner of the warehouse, where it wasn’t quite as crowded. We perched on a couple of untapped kegs, and he looked at me expectantly.

“I’ve decided to change my life,” I said, feeling a little silly about the grandiosity of the announcement. At the same time, the words sent a thrilling shiver through my entire body, raising goose bumps on my bare arms.

“I don’t hate Falworth,” I said, almost in wonder. Before this month, I might have said I did. “But I don’t want for this to be the only place I ever live. I never left before because people depended on me.”

I took a deep breath, pausing to catalog Nate’s reaction. He was listening intently, eyes focused on my face, nodding slightly.

“I’m not sorry I stayed here to help the people I love, but I am sorry that I became so resentful,” I said softly. I didn’t know why I was unburdening myself this way to a man I’d known for a month, but right from the beginning it had been easy to talk to

Nate. And right now, I needed to say these things. To hear the words and hard-fought clarity aloud, from my own mouth. “I don’t want to live my life as a resentful person who uses old excuses for not trying something scary and new.

“Suppressing my own needs and dreams turned me a little hard. Bitter,” I admitted.

“If it helps,” Nate said, “you make hard and bitter look incredibly sexy.” I hiccupped a laugh and he reached out a hand to stroke my shoulder. “In all seriousness, Jane, it’s pretty easy to see that the hardness, the bitterness, that you speak of is a tiny, thin layer at the surface.” His warm fingers squeezed. “Underneath, you’re all heart.”

Maybe. I inhaled through my nose and shook off the serious. “Anyway, all of this is to say that Bruce and I are saying goodbye to this town for a while. I don’t have a real plan yet, but I’m going to start by staying at Bella’s apartment in Chicago while I find work and my own place.”

The words tumbled out at a breakneck pace. I waited for Nate’s reaction. Would he freeze or recoil as he realized that his holiday fling wasn’t staying in the holiday locale? Would he feel—ugh, followed?

“My impending move has nothing to do with you,” I said truthfully, although a bit more forcefully than was probably necessary. “You just happen to also live in Chicago.”

I looked at his hand, which was still squeezing my shoulder. “I just thought you should know now, before anything else happened between us. Because I’ll be there. Where you are. Which doesn’t mean anything!”

Oh good God, Jane. Shut. Up.

Only silence in response. Was he scanning the room, looking for the closest exit? I

finally got brave enough to raise my eyes to his face. Nate's lips were twitching and his eyes were bright with—delight? “Are you quite finished?” he asked.

I nodded mutely.

“Good,” he said firmly. Then he pulled me to him—yanked me, really—until I was on his lap and his lips were pressed to mine, kissing me deeply.

It was the kind of kiss that went on for eons, a kiss that went from frantic and forceful to light and sweet and back again. It was a kiss that stole all the breath from my lungs and sent heat waves to my fingers and toes. It was a gasping, clutching kind of kiss that I never wanted to end.

Nate pulled away to murmur directly in my ear, “I already told you this, Jane, but apparently you weren't listening. I'd want you in Falworth or Chicago or any other place. I want to try us. I'm fucking thrilled you're moving to the city. Is that what you needed to hear?”

“I didn't need to hear anything,” I retorted in his face, all attitude. But fine. “I didn't mind hearing it though.”

Oh, that grin. “Happy New Year, J-Bird.”

Epilogue

January 6

“That's the last of it,” Sean said, slamming the back door of my truck against the pile of suitcases and boxes packed inside. “I'll take Bruce for a quick walk,” he said, with a definite catch in his throat. “Tire him out so he sleeps through the ride.” He was going to miss the dog much more than he missed me. But at least seeing Bruce gave

him a strong incentive to visit.

Bella handed me my phone. She'd been busily typing into it for the last several minutes. "OK, I've programmed in here the names of three women I met this fall. Tess, Jo, and Emily. They're all total badasses, in very different ways." She nodded at me emphatically with her eyebrows raised. "You should connect with them—for friendship, for Chicago orientation, for leads on jobs, anything. I've already done intro texts, and Tess immediately offered to take you out for a drink tomorrow night."

"Great!" I was certainly not going to turn down the opportunity to make a new friend in a city where I knew almost no one.

My phone buzzed, and I looked down to read a text from Nate. Drive safely. Dinner tonight? At the place where I bought your hot sauce? I'll pick you up at Bella's place at 7.

Bella read over my shoulder. "Someone's very excited to see you." She giggled. "Hey, you do know what Nate's last name is? Wright. Jane, he is literally Mr. Right."

I groaned. "I've been waiting for you to make that godawful joke for days."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:11 am*

She doubled over with laughter at her own terrible joke, and I pretended to hate it. Inside, though, I was simply a stew of giddiness. I'd never felt this sense of wondrous anticipation in my entire life.

January was a very quiet month in Falworth, so nobody at any of my jobs had even cared that I'd given less than two weeks' notice. It turned out that Sean had a cameraman buddy who wanted to sublet my apartment, and I was happy to turn my lease over to him. Happy that Sean would have a friend next door. Kelly was a little startled by my abrupt decision to move, but she was coming down for a visit in two weeks.

Bella and I had spent the last five days coming to terms on the shop, as well as continuing our BFF catch-up. I'd spent multiple nights with her at Greta's, and we'd talked until our throats were raspy and the sun was coming up. In fact, the only reason I hadn't left at the crack of dawn this morning was because I'd wanted to say goodbye to her in person.

I let out a huffy sigh. "It figures. The only thing that's making it hard for me to go is that I don't want to leave you! As usual, you make everything so difficult."

She rolled her eyes at my petulance—but then they filled with tears. "I want you to go, but I hate that you're leaving." She cleared cobwebs out of her voice. "As you well know, finding my way back into our friendship has been every bit as important to me as reconnecting with Michael. I love you, Jane."

We gave each other a fierce hug, parting when Sean walked up with Bruce. I swiped at my wet face. "Love you too, Bells."

Then I was in my truck, on County Road B, heading south. I blew Falworth a kiss in my rearview mirror.

The End